



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and Middle East News Update

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Headlines:

- **Smotrich: Releasing Hostages Not Top Priority**
- **Israel Verifying Qatar's Claim on Medicine Reaching Captives**
- **Humanitarian Aid Returns to Northern Gaza**
- **US Vetoes UN Res Demanding Humanitarian Ceasefire in Gaza**
- **Sinwar's Health Deteriorates, Suffering From Severe Pneumonia**
- **Contacts Underway for Another Summit in Paris**
- **Gaza, Ukraine Loom Large as G20 Foreign Ministers Meet**
- **Greek Ship Attacked in Red Sea by Houthis Arrives in Aden**

Commentary:

- **Yedioth Ahronoth: "Playing with Fire"**
 - By Ben-Dror Yemini
- **Yedioth Ahronoth: "How Committed is the Gov't to the Hostages?"**
 - By Sima Kadmon

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News Excerpts

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Ynet News

Smotrich: Releasing Hostages Not Top Priority

Israel's Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich said that bringing back the hostages abducted by Hamas in Gaza is not the top priority. "No, this is not the top priority. Why have a competition? How is that important now? Hamas must be destroyed," he said in a radio interview. "It is very important but it is clear that saying things like bringing them back at all costs is a problem," he said referring to the calls from the families of those still held captive to do all that is possible to bring about their release. "They have to be returned, there must be pressure on Hamas," Smotrich said. The families of hostages meanwhile demonstrated against the government calling for more to be done to bring their loved ones, home. Smotrich then tried to clarify his words. "I was asked in an interview if returning the hostages was more important than destroying Hamas and winning the war," he said. "My answer is clear. Only by destroying Hamas and winning the war would we bring about the return of the hostages. Anyone who calls for a deal at any cost will bring about defeat in the war and will lower the chances of the hostages being released."

Israel Hayom

Israel Verifying Claim on Medicine Reaching Captives

The Qatari Foreign Ministry said that Hamas has started delivering medication for the approximately 100 hostages held in Gaza, a month after the medications arrived in Gaza. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said Israel was aware of this claim and that this was because of his insistence on getting direct evidence that the medication reached its intended patients. "The Qatari announcement is the direct result of PM Netanyahu's insistence on receiving proof that the medicines have reached our hostages. Israel will evaluate the credibility of the report and continue to act for the well-being of our hostages," the statement read.

I24 News

Humanitarian Aid Returns to Northern Gaza

After a hiatus of nearly three weeks due to violence and internal strife, humanitarian aid has resumed its flow into the northern Gaza Strip, eliciting scenes of both desperation and disorder among residents. According to several Palestinian sources, trucks laden with essential supplies recently reached the al-Rashid area, marking the first significant delivery of aid to the region in weeks. Thousands of residents, grappling with dire shortages, hastily gathered to collect bags of flour and other necessities for their families, underscoring the acute need for assistance in the conflict-ridden enclave. However, the distribution of aid unfolded amidst an atmosphere of heightened tensions and disorder. Disturbing videos circulated on social media depicted chaotic scenes in Gaza City, with residents scrambling for aid amid reports of gunshots, fostering an atmosphere of panic and fear.

US Vetoes UN Res Demanding Humanitarian Ceasefire

The United States vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that demanded an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. It's the third time the US has vetoed a resolution related to the war in Gaza. It also comes amid increasing global calls for a ceasefire as conditions in the enclave continue to rapidly deteriorate. More than 29,100 Palestinians — the majority of whom are women and children — have been killed since the war began, according to the Ministry of Health in Hamas-run Gaza. Thirteen countries voted in favor of the Algeria-led resolution, while the US voted against it. The United Kingdom abstained. The resolution called for an immediate ceasefire, the delivery of aid to the entire Gaza Strip, Israel's compliance with the orders of the International Court of Justice and for all parties to respect their obligations under international law. It also rejected the forced displacement of Palestinians and demanded the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages.

Jerusalem Post

Sinwar's Health Deteriorates, Suffering From Pneumonia

Hamas leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, may be suffering from a complicated case of pneumonia, N12 reported, citing an anonymous Arab country. The country in question said it had heard the report from senior Hamas officials. According to the N12 report, the country had been in contact with Hamas, asking the group to advance toward a ceasefire. Hamas subsequently responded that its situation was grave; it lacked ammunition, and its military structures were deteriorating. It was reported that Hamas's leadership in Qatar and Gaza was unsure of Sinwar's whereabouts, with the Saudi newspaper Elaph claiming he may have fled from the Gaza Strip to Egypt. However, Israel's Kan News said that Sinwar had resumed communications with the Hamas leadership abroad. Speculations on Sinwar's fate come amid Defense Minister Yoav Gallant's statement that Hamas is in search of a replacement for Sinwar. [Dig Deeper "Escape to Egypt: Did Hamas Leader Yahya Sinwar Flee Gaza?" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Israel National News

Contacts Underway for Another Summit in Paris

Israel is holding talks for the purpose of convening another summit in Paris that will deal with the attempts to forge a deal for the release of the hostages held by Hamas in Gaza, Channel 12 News reported. According to the report, officials in Jerusalem are debating whether to go ahead with the summit before a message is received from Hamas that it has softened its demands regarding the deal. Diplomatic officials feel that some kind of progress has been made in the talks and are discussing various messages that have been exchanged between the parties in recent days. This is mainly due to the presence in Israel of the head of the CIA and US President Joe Biden's envoy, Brett McGurk, who is scheduled to arrive in Israel on Thursday. The month of Ramadan will begin in two and a half weeks, and it is believed that all parties are interested in taking advantage of this period to finalize a deal.

Gaza, Ukraine Loom Large as G20 Foreign Ministers Meet

G20 foreign ministers open a two-day meeting in Brazil, with the outlook bleak for progress on a thorny agenda of conflicts and crises, from the Gaza and Ukraine wars to growing polarization. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov are both expected in Rio de Janeiro for the first high-level G20 meeting of the year -- though not China's Wang Yi. In a world torn by conflicts and divisions, Brazil, which took over the rotating G20 presidency from India in December, has voiced hopes for what President Luiz Lula da Silva calls "the forum with the greatest capacity to positively influence the international agenda." But Lula's bid to make the G20 a space for finding common ground suffered when the veteran leftist ignited a diplomatic firestorm by accusing Israel of "genocide," comparing its military campaign in the Gaza Strip to the Holocaust. The comments drew outrage in Israel, which declared him "persona non grata," and could overshadow any bid to de-escalate the conflict via the G20. Despite a push from Western countries for the group to condemn President Vladimir Putin's invasion, the G20's last summit, held in New Delhi in September, ended with a watered-down statement that denounced the use of force but did not explicitly name Russia, which maintains friendly ties with fellow members like India and Brazil. Underlining the G20 stalemate, the G7 group of top economies -- Ukrainian allies Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the US-- will hold its own virtual meeting on the war, the second anniversary of Russia's invasion.

Reuters

Greek Ship Attacked in Red Sea by Houthis Arrives in Aden

The Greek-flagged bulk cargo vessel Sea Champion arrived in the southern Yemeni port of Aden after being attacked in the Red Sea in what appeared to have been a mistaken missile strike by Houthi militia, shipping and military sources said. Shipping risks have escalated due to repeated drone and missile strikes in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait by the Iran-aligned Houthis since November. US and British forces have responded with several strikes on Houthi facilities but have so far failed to halt the attacks. The US military's Central Command said that the Houthis had fired two anti-ship ballistic missiles at the Sea Champion, a US-owned bulk carrier. It said one of the missiles detonated near the ship causing minor damage. The Sea Champion, which was ferrying corn from Argentina to Aden, the seat of Yemen's internationally recognized government, was attacked twice, with a window damaged but no crew injuries, Greek shipping ministry sources said. The US Central Command said the Sea Champion has delivered humanitarian aid to Yemen 11 times in the past five years. A port source in Aden and a separate shipping source said the vessel was unloading part of its cargo of some 9,229 tonnes of corn in Aden, before it heads to the northern Yemeni port of Hodeidah, an area controlled by the Houthis, where it was meant to discharge the remaining load of some 31,000 tonnes. The port source in Aden, who declined to be identified, said the attack on the vessel was a mistake. A separate port source in Hodeidah, who also declined to be identified, said the Houthis informed them that the attack was not intentional.

Playing with Fire

By Ben-Dror Yemini

- It was no coincidence that Hamas chose the name al-Aqsa Flood for its murderous attack on October 7. And it is no coincidence that all Israeli governments, as it did this week, have deliberated over this hot potato, which has the word “flammable” written all over it. And the threat, both imagined and real, extends well beyond the Palestinian arena and encompasses the entire Muslim world. There is something about that site that has precipitated riots and has ignited fires for more than 100 years. There is nothing theoretical about this. Many people have already been killed in the battle for that site. Things weren’t always this way. Jerusalem, which was once only the Old City, was a neglected city. As of the mid-19th century, according to all censuses, there was a Jewish majority in the Old City.
- Al-Aqsa Mosque in the Old City was not a focus for Muslims during the hundreds of years in which the mosque was under the control of the Ottoman Empire. The moment the aspirations of the Jewish people to establish a national home received international recognition, the Muslims organized against it. Pogroms were carried out against Jews in Jerusalem as early as 1920. Six people were killed and Jewish women were raped. After that, Amin al-Husseini found a way to rile up the Muslims with the Aqsa libel: the Jews, said the greatest inciter since the advent of Zionism, are planning to take over the compound, to demolish the mosque and to build the third temple in its place.
- Obviously, no such Zionist plan existed, even if there were, as there are today, some people who belong to the most extreme messianic fringes whose dream of doing that. For 100 years, Jerusalem has been taking its liter of blood, because of malicious incitement. Sometimes it was the Nazi mufti. Other times it was Muslim preachers who wanted to be considered his successor. Jerusalem was also elevated to new heights in the Palestinian Authority’s rhetoric. Among Israeli Arabs it was, and perhaps still is, Sheikh Raed Salah, who continued to foster the Aqsa libel and also raised a generation of extremist youngsters, some of who committed acts of terrorism.
- Ahead of Ramadan, the issue of the Temple Mount and al-Aqsa Mosque has now come up again this year with the question of how to have freedom of worship without bloodshed. There is no magic formula for keeping tempers calm, because this is a libel of the most despicable kind. Ever since the Six-Day War, it is the Jews who have been discriminated against, as it is their access to the Temple Mount that has been restricted. The threats made by the radicals produced deterrence. Certainly now, when Israel doesn’t need another front.
- These are difficult times. These are times in which in addition to the incumbent prime minister, there is another person on whom the entire coalition is dependent. He is the biggest extremist in Israeli politics. He is a persona non grata in nearly every the world capital. And this man, Itamar Ben Gvir, now wants to dictate his policy to the government. Netanyahu knows exactly with whom it is that he is dealing.

- In the past, he refused to allow Ben Gvir to visit the Temple Mount. “Ben Gvir would have set fire to the entire Middle East. He would have roused the wrath of a billion Muslims against us,” Netanyahu said. “I said, there’s a limit. There are things that I am not willing to do.” Only four years have since elapsed. Today there is a different Netanyahu. Not a Netanyahu who leads. A Netanyahu who is led. Ben Gvir demands. Netanyahu is liable to obey. Israel may have made a historic mistake in 1967 when it allowed full Muslim control to be retained over the Temple Mount. But the Netanyahu of 2020 spoke correctly.
- And the Netanyahu of 2024 is liable to make a decision that even if it does not inspire the wrath of a billion Muslims, it still could inspire the wrath of hundreds of thousands. And it won’t take hundreds of thousands to set the ground on fire. Even a few thousand people could open another front. Israel went through a difficult experience in May 2021. Then too, there was a clash with Hamas. Then too, the Aqsa Mosque story was invoked. Thousands of Israeli Arabs took to the streets. Some of them took part in riots and lynch attacks. People were concerned this might happen again after October 7. It didn’t.
- A handful of demonstrations were held here and there. But not only did the streets not burn, the majority of the Israeli Arabs, as indicated by the polls and the quiet streets, chose to identify with Israel. Not with Hamas. But nothing lasts forever. Hamas had hoped to start a multiple-theater front that would include the Arabs in the territories and in Israel. That failed to materialize. But that might still change. If Netanyahu insists on punishing the Israeli Arabs, of all people, and to bar their entry to the Temple Mount, then a few thousand people might begin to riot. That is exactly what Hamas wants. Netanyahu has to decide once again between Israel’s national interest and his Ben Gvir interest. And before making a final decision, the prime minister should revisit the correct things that he said in 2020. They remain valid in 2024.

How Committed is the Israeli Government to the Hostages?

By Sima Kadmon

- The video that the IDF Spokesperson's Office released doesn't say much about Shiri, Ariel and Kfir Bibas's condition. At most, it proves the commonly-held assessment that they arrived in Gaza alive. Since that Saturday when we first became acquainted with them, it has been impossible for us to get the images of them out of our heads. The mother wrapped a thin blanket around her two children, her face contorted in terror, her eyes darting back and forth in search of help. Her red-haired children appeared calm in their mother's arms, not realizing that their world had been forever overturned. And the sounds of little Kfir's bubbling laughter in a video from back when the Bibas family was still a father, mother and two children who lived in a small house in a verdant village brimming with happiness and the sound of babies. No one in Israel knows what became of the Bibas family.
- The father was informed of their death while he was in captivity. What is that, if not the epitome of evil? IDF officials don't know whether the mother and her two children survived, but the impression that has been created by everything we've seen and heard is that we ought to brace ourselves for the absolute worst. It's unfathomable. Had anyone told us in late October that the hostages, who were torn from their beds in the towns, kibbutzim and moshavim in the Gaza periphery, still wouldn't be home at the end of February, we wouldn't have believed it possible Five months? 136 days? How can that be?
- Just for the sake of comparison, the effort to get Israeli POWs back from Egypt after the Yom Kippur War began on November 15, 1973. They spent less than six weeks in captivity. Our POWs returned from Syrian captivity in June and July of 1974, after nine months. At the pace that the negotiations are being held over the hostages—civilians who are elderly and sick, women, male and female soldiers—it is already clear that they are closer in terms of their time in captivity to the POWs who were freed from Syria than those who were freed from Egypt. Of course, there are differences between captives who are held by orderly state actors and captives who are held by a terrorist organization in Gaza.
- But the most troubling difference is the difference between the State of Israel's sense of commitment towards its captives after the Yom Kippur War and the Netanyahu government's sense of commitment towards its hostages. Meir Shani, a former combat pilot with the 201st Squadron who was held as a POW by Syria, was interviewed for the [documentary] television series, *The One*, which was broadcast by Kan Television this past September [Kadmon, who served with the squadron in the Yom Kippur War, interviewed the subjects]. I knew that the State of Israel stood behind me, he said proudly. That is what kept him going while he was being tortured, he said. He knew that Israel would get him released. The POWs in Syria also heard the Israeli warplanes on their bombing runs over their heads.

- Their captors also used psychological warfare when they told them that the State of Israel no longer existed and that they no longer had any home to return to. They nevertheless had faith. They had confidence. The State of Israel would never abandon them. I doubt whether the hostages who are being held in Hamas's tunnels are confident that the State of Israel will get them out. The first-person accounts told by former hostages who returned from Gaza prove that the hostages are deeply afraid and that the psychological warfare, along with the long amount of time that has passed, is chipping away at their resilience and strength. They know who serves in the current government. They know what this government, with its extremist and messianic right-wing members, might do to implement its agenda and to serve its members' personal interests.
- They also know what we all have seen; this government has been in office for barely over a year, and we've already had two prime ministers: Yariv Levin and Itamar Ben Gvir. If we thought last October that it would take another few days, no more than a week, for Israel to honor its most fundamental contract with its citizens—which is to guarantee their security—all that has gradually been eroded and worn away. So many awful things happen here every day that undermine our confidence that the people leading us know what they are doing. It begins with the relationships within the war cabinet, where the prime minister hides his intentions from his partners.
- How can the public be persuaded under these circumstances that the prime minister's chief priority is freeing the hostages? How can we believe him when the days continue to pass without any progress being made? How can we not think that there is just one thing that he is trying to do: to prolong the war so as to avoid what awaits him after it is over? Demonstrations, protests, a state commission of inquiry and elections. Equally disturbing is the reason that Gantz and Eisenkot have chosen to remain in the government instead of quitting it and pushing for elections. They might think that they have something to contribute to the war cabinet, but every passing day proves that nobody gives them the time of day.
- Apparently, the artificial mountain of Knesset seats [predicted by the polls] is more alluring. That house of cards will collapse the moment it becomes clear that it is their presence in the Netanyahu government that is preventing elections, and that while they have been busy trying to maintain their fictitious polling numbers, they have been simultaneously preserving the Netanyahu government's 64-seat coalition. Who would ever have believed that nearly five months after the pogrom in the Gaza periphery, the very same people who were responsible for it would still be in office, first among them the prime minister, who had the gall to say that the next elections would only be held in a few years' time.
- What arrogance and contemptuousness it takes to stand before the citizens of Israel and to announce that he has no intention of resigning either at the war's end or afterwards. To talk about "total victory" when we all know that no victory, total or otherwise, will ever be achieved, and that from Netanyahu's standpoint, total victory means him remaining in office as prime minister.

- **How pathetic he has to be that instead of showing contrition and bowing his head in shame and behaving modestly, he called a press conference in which the only thing he had to say was to complain about the media. What a small man a head of state has to be to care only about who the donors are to a public campaign against him: “You’re the leader, you’re to blame.” Such a simple and true slogan. Every single word. But in Netanyahu’s eyes, out of all the things in the world that need to be investigated, the most important is to investigate the people whom he believes are out to get him.**