



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and Middle East News Update

Friday, February 9

Headlines:

- **Protests Held For, Against Hostage Deal**
- **Israel Ramps up Strikes on Rafah as US Warns of ‘Disaster’**
- **Biden: Gaza Fighting ‘Over the Top,’ Pushing for Pause**
- **Abdullah to Be First Arab Leader to Visit the White House Since Oct. 7**
- **Israel Could Request an Alliance to Finish Destroying the Tunnels**
- **Nicaragua Files Application to Join South Genocide Case Against Israel**
- **Hezbollah Fires Some 30 Rockets Into Northern Israel**
- **Turkey, Somalia Sign Defense Deal**

Commentary:

- **Ma’ariv: “Concern of Tsunami to Establish Palestinian State”**
- By Anna Barsky
- **Yedioth Ahronoth: “A Critical Stage”**
- By Nahum Barnea

S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace
1725 I St NW Suite 300, Washington, DC 20006
The Hon. Robert Wexler, President

News Excerpts

February 9, 2023

Ha'aretz

Protests Held For, Against Hostage Deal

Thousands of people demonstrated against a hostage-release deal outside the Israeli government compound in Jerusalem as the war cabinet convened to discuss the Hamas cease-fire proposal. The rally was organized by several right-wing organizations, including the Miluimnikim [Reservists] Camp and the Mothers of Combat Fighters groups. Meanwhile, A protest in favor of a hostage release and cease-fire deal was held simultaneously in Tel Aviv, where families of hostages and supporters gathered to demand that the government make a deal for their release from Gaza. [Read More "Israel Backing off Hostage Talks Unless Hamas Drops 'Delusional' Demands" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Times of Israel

Israel Ramps up Strikes on Rafah as US Warns of 'Disaster'

Israeli forces stepped up airstrikes on Rafah after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to expand the military offensive into the southernmost Gaza city, where over a million Palestinians have crowded amid the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. The strikes came as Israeli forces continued to operate in Khan Younis, to the south of Rafah, with an officer saying Hamas forces in the city had largely been destroyed even as its Gaza leader [Yahya Sinwar](#) remained on the loose despite intensive efforts to track him down. Israeli planes bombed parts of Rafah, residents said, killing at least 11 people in strikes on two houses. Tanks also shelled some areas in eastern Rafah, intensifying the residents' fears of an imminent ground assault. In Washington, the United States issued strident warnings against Israel expanding a large-scale offensive into the city, warning of catastrophic consequences unless civilians sheltering in the city were accounted for. [Read More "Sinwar Set for 'Arafat-Style' Exile" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Reuters

Biden: Gaza Fighting 'Over the Top,' Pushing for Pause

US President Joe Biden suggested that Israel's military response in Gaza has been "over the top," adding that he is working to achieve a sustained pause in fighting. "I'm of the view, as you know, that the conduct of the response in the Gaza Strip has been over the top," Biden told reporters at the White House, in some of his sharpest criticism to date of the government of Prime Minister Netanyahu. "I'm pushing very hard now to deal with this hostage ceasefire," Biden said. "There are a lot of innocent people who are starving, a lot of innocent people who are in trouble and dying, and it's gotta stop." Israel began its military offensive after Hamas militants from Gaza killed 1,200 people and took 253 hostages in southern Israel on Oct. 7. Gaza's health ministry says more than 27,000 Palestinians have been confirmed killed, with thousands more feared buried under rubble. [Read More "Displaced Gazans Resort to Living in Chicken Sheds" \(Reuters\)](#)

Jordan King to Visit Biden at the White House

Jordanian King Abdullah II will meet President Biden at the White House next week to discuss the war in Gaza and the growing tensions in the region. The king will be the first Arab head of state to visit the White House since Oct. 7. The trip, which also includes stops in Canada, France and Germany, is aimed at mobilizing "international support for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza," the Jordanian Embassy in DC said. The Biden administration is facing widespread criticism in the Arab world over its support for Israel and reluctance to call for a ceasefire in Gaza. "President Biden and King Abdullah II will discuss the ongoing situation in Gaza and efforts to produce an enduring end to the crisis," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said. King Abdullah is expected to also meet with Vice President Kamala Harris, Secretary of State Tony Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and members of Congress. [Read More "Arab Ministers Begin Arriving in Riyadh for Gaza Summit" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Israel Could Request an Alliance to Destroy the Tunnels

One scenario that is not being publicly discussed, but which former top Israeli officials are aware of, is the possibility that at some point Israel may request a global alliance to finish destroying Hamas's tunnel in Gaza. The reason for such a scenario, though ideally, Israel would prefer to destroy all of the tunnels itself, is simply that it may run out of time to do so before a point at which it can no longer operate standing forces deep within Gazan cities and towns. Getting a global alliance to sign on to the idea of finishing the job, top sources say, could delegate achieving the goal beyond the point at which Israel can work on the issue itself, and potentially justify targeted Israeli returns into Gaza to handle the issue if such a global alliance failed to follow through. [Read More "US Senate Advances \\$95 Bln Ukraine, Israel Aid Bill" \(Reuters\)](#)

Nicaragua Files to Join South Genocide Case Against Israel

Nicaragua has filed an application with the International Court of Justice to join South Africa in its genocide case against Israel, the World Court said. The court said Nicaragua considers Israel's conduct in its war against Hamas to be in "violation of its obligations under the Genocide Convention." South Africa and Israel have been invited to furnish written observations on Nicaragua's application for permission to intervene as a party. The kind of intervention Nicaragua is requesting has rarely been granted by the ICJ. Several other states have signaled they might want to intervene in the case, but none have formally done so before Nicaragua. Germany was the first to say it would intervene, on Israel's behalf, rejecting the genocide allegation and stating that Israel was "defending itself" after the "inhuman" onslaught by Hamas on Oct 7. South Africa filed a genocide case against Israel declaring that it was in breach of its obligations under the 1948 Genocide Convention in its war with Hamas in Gaza.

Hezbollah Fires Some 30 Rockets Into Northern Israel

Sirens were heard in the Upper Galilee communities of Dalton, Kerem Ben Zimra and Kadita after some 30 rockets were launched into northern Israel in a heavy barrage from Lebanon. All projectiles landed in unpopulated areas, causing no damage or casualties. This attack followed a car bombing in Nabatieh, southern Lebanon, intended for a Hezbollah commander, who was wounded, according to Lebanese sources, and not killed. The drone strike in Nabatieh came as Hezbollah and Israel continue to trade blows across the border, with the Shi'ite terrorist group having claimed responsibility for at least seven attacks on Israeli soil.

Turkey, Somalia Sign Defense Deal

Turkey and Somalia signed a cooperation deal on defense amid lingering tensions in the Horn of Africa over a controversial agreement between Ethiopia and the breakaway region of Somaliland. The Defense and Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement was signed between Turkish Defense Minister Yasar Guler and his Somali counterpart, Abdulkadir Mohamed Nur, who paid an official visit to Ankara. “The agreement we signed today involves cooperation on the fight against terrorism and military-financial cooperation,” Nur said, speaking at a joint press conference. “We believe that the agreement will contribute greatly to Somalia.” Guler, who described the two defense chiefs' meeting as “fruitful,” said that the deal “will further improve” bilateral military relations between the two countries. “Somalia is an important partner of Turkey in Africa,” he added, reiterating his country’s support for the African country’s territorial integrity and sovereignty. Turkey-educated Nur's visit to Ankara comes as tensions in the Horn of Africa are simmering over a Jan. 1 deal signed between Somaliland and Ethiopia that would grant Addis Ababa access to the Red Sea in return for the recognition of breakaway Somaliland. Somalia, which doesn’t recognize the de facto republic, rejected the agreement as a violation of its sovereignty. Ankara publicly backed the territorial integrity of Somalia in the face of tensions. Somalia — one of the few countries to host a Turkish military base — maintains close military and economic cooperation with Turkey.

Concern of International Tsunami to Establish Palestinian State

By Anna Barsky

- Israeli government officials are worried by the US administration's intensive activity to promote the idea of establishing a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip under one government that will be based on what is being called a revitalized Palestinian Authority. American officials say the State Department is reviewing the idea of recognizing a Palestinian state as part of a larger initiative that takes into account the day after the Hamas reign in Gaza is over. State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller recently said the US is actively seeking the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with real security guarantees for Israel as the best way to grant peace and security to Israel and the Palestinians.
- US Secretary of State Antony Blinken also recently instructed a team to do preparatory work ahead of the possibility of American or international unilateral recognition of a Palestinian state without a dialogue with Israel and without Israeli consent. This came up in Blinken's latest visit to Israel in his talks with senior Israeli officials in Jerusalem. According to administration officials and European officials who are involved, Israeli officials expressed concern over what they called "the Biden administration falling in love with the idea of the establishment of a Palestinian state and unilateral recognition as a means of pressure on Israel." These officials said that recently this issue had become more prominent on the Middle East agenda being promoted by the Americans and Europeans. "This is no longer a trial balloon or a theoretical idea.
- The idea of recognizing a Palestinian state is gaining traction and is being promoted in practice," they said. "It was for good reason that several Western leaders recently expressed their support for the establishment of a Palestinian state and this includes leaders considered right-wing and very pro-Israel, such as Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. The idea of unilaterally recognizing a Palestinian state was discussed on various levels and forums, including the most senior." One official said, "The Americans continue to promote the idea of a revitalized Palestinian Authority and in tandem, the current Palestinian Authority in Ramallah is in the process of presenting a reform. This is in keeping with the US demand that it prove that it is indeed becoming an entity that meets the definition of a 'revitalized Palestinian Authority.' The reform includes governmental changes, the manner in which the security organizations are run and there is talk about a new government of technocrats."
- Israeli officials view the reform as purely cosmetic changes. One official said, "the changes will not change the principles that Israel wants—a fundamental reform in the schools, changing the curriculum to ensure that the PA no longer educates hatred for Israel and does not encourage terrorism, does not extol terrorists and does not call them 'holy shahids.' Nothing of that is happening."

- **Several Israeli officials have warned of “a significant diplomatic event that is not being properly addressed by us.” New Hope Chairman Minister Gideon Saar wrote a post this week, “even the fans of the ‘two-state solution’ (a fiction, in my opinion) have to realize the significance of unilateral international recognition of a Palestinian state. This will not be a Palestinian state that is part of an agreement that ends the conflict. This will be a Palestinian state while at the same time, the conflict continues — under improved conditions for them and without their conceding the right of return and their aspiration for all of the land ‘from the river to the sea.’”**
- **MK Zeev Elkin, a member of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, introduced an urgent motion to debate the ‘announcements and reports on the issue of recognition of a Palestinian state and the Israeli need to prepare for a possible diplomatic challenge.’ He said: “ Hamas’s popularity in Judea and Samaria is today even higher than in Gaza. The significance of the establishment of a Palestinian state will be that Hamas will be in power. This is an idea that is dangerous for the State of Israel strategically and requires in-depth thinking. “One of Sinwar’s objectives was to revive the idea of a Palestinian state. Establishing this state will be a prize for Hamas and will constitute a danger of an October 7 everywhere in Israel. Nobody would have told the US, after September 11, to approve the establishment of an al-Qaida state. The State of Israel must make its answer very clear—absolutely no. We must not wait; we must prepare today for an international campaign.”**

A Critical Stage

By Nahum Barnea

- **Whether we like it or not, we are entering a critical stage of the war over the outcome of the October 7 catastrophe. The fighting has been going on for four months. There have been military achievements, but they did not bring about a decisive victory. The framework for a deal to free the hostages that was decided on in Cairo, with Israel's semi-consent, is moving backwards; Hamas is proposing a framework of its own that the Biden administration and the Sunni states chose to accept as a basis for discussion. The Israeli government is split: some members of the security cabinet view the deal as a basis for negotiations; others reject it utterly. Netanyahu is in both camps. Confused? You should be. Every actor and his riddle.**
- **The Americans' position is clear. They are in favor of negotiations on the framework proposed by Hamas: an agreement to get the hostages released; an end to the war; new Palestinian administration in Gaza and a new Middle East with normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia at the center. And a new bonus: a hot conflict between the US and Iran's proxies. The riddle is what Biden would be willing to do, if anything, to enforce his will. What US Secretary of State Antony Blinken heard in the course of his visit to Israel this week only increased the sense of disgust felt in the White House. At his news conference, Blinken chose to attack Israel at its most sensitive spot in the international arena. He said that the fact that the Israelis had been dehumanized on October 7 could not be a license to dehumanize others. There could no harsher warning than this from an ally.**
- **Like Biden, he has become convinced that Netanyahu is no longer the person who makes the Israeli government's decisions. Conditions can be created that will force him to bend. The Americans' doomsday weapon is twofold: they can cut security aid and hurt Israel's international standing. They have refrained from doing this up until now. They have even refrained from threatening. Netanyahu is an actor of a different kind. He has ramped up his rhetoric in the last few days; he flatly rejected the Hamas proposal; he let his coalition partners attack the Americans savagely and he threatened to expand the fighting to Rafah. At the same time, he worked quietly with Gantz and Eisenkot on the details of the plan.**
- **The riddle is: what does this man want? Aside from his obvious, predictable, contemptible desire to prevent, at any price, the unraveling of his government, from the right or left, does he have any opinions at all about the matter at hand? A possible military attack on Rafah is also part of the riddle. Threatening is fine: in war, you threaten. Even when you attack, you don't have to actually attack. A lookout position can also be called Rafah, but a military attack on an area in which more than a million people are living at the moment, in tents and in the streets, will be very difficult for the US administration and no less difficult for Egypt, the neighbors. It would be a PR disaster.**

- **Unless that is, Netanyahu has been seized by a spirit of prophecy and he believes it is only a matter of days until we defeat Hamas with a military blow, whether in Khan Yunis or in Rafah, the hostages will be rescued from captivity by our troops and we will declare what he calls “total victory.” If that is the scenario, why is he asking for hundreds of billions for the defense budget and why is he asking, by means of a scandalous draft bill, to extend military service for all? It’s a riddle. It is customary to think that the source of Netanyahu’s inflammatory rhetoric is his fear of Ben Gvir. I assume that there is truth to that. I would like to suggest another possibility, no less disturbing: it is not fear of Ben Gvir that is pulling him to the messianic edges but rather the trends that come to the fore in in-depth polls, the mood prevailing among the Instagram and TikTok users.**
- **Gantz and Eisenkot are another riddle. Their priorities are clear: hostages first. It is not clear what hostage deal they want. Do they want a single humanitarian round that will free all the women and young people under 19, after which Israel can, at least theoretically, resume the fighting, or are they willing to go for the whole package, with the very high prices that Hamas is demanding? It’s easy to criticize Netanyahu and his crazed partners from the right wing. It’s harder to formulate a position that will entail a high price, both electorally and morally. Every actor and their riddle.**