



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM  
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Friday, March 1*

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# News Excerpts

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## Axios

### **Dozens of Palestinians Killed Around Gaza Aid Convoy**

Dozens of Palestinians were killed in an incident around an aid convoy in northern Gaza. Hamas blamed Israeli forces who opened fire on a crowd of Palestinians, while Israel claimed most of the casualties were the result of Palestinians being trampled as crowds stormed and looted the trucks. The incident, which took place amid indirect talks between Israel and Hamas over a new hostage deal, will likely dramatically increase pressure for a temporary ceasefire. [The Biden administration](#) has been warning Israeli officials for weeks about the breakdown of law and order in Gaza. At least 104 Palestinians were killed in the incident, Gaza health officials say, pushing the Palestinian death toll from the nearly five months of war above **30,000**. More than 750 others were wounded. The incident took place as a convoy of 30 aid trucks traveling from Rafah to northern Gaza reached al-Rashid Street in western Gaza City.

## Israel Hayom

### **Biden Dogged by Democrats' Anger Over Israel, Poll Finds**

A majority of Democrats prefer a presidential candidate who does not back US military aid for Israel, according to a new Reuters/Ipsos poll that showed Democratic President Joe Biden tied with Donald Trump ahead of the November presidential election. The three-day poll, which closed on Wednesday, showed 56% of respondents who identified themselves as Democrats said they were less likely to support a candidate who backs military assistance for Israel, compared to 40% who said they would be more likely to support such a candidate. The poll results illustrate a potentially critical vulnerability for Biden, who has angered some within his party by supporting Israel in its war against the Hamas terror organization, ahead of a close November election in which Biden will be loath to lose any support within his party.

## Times of Israel

### **Netanyahu Says Hamas Putting up 'Brick Wall' of Demands**

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed pessimism that Israel and Hamas could reach a deal to pause fighting in Gaza and release hostages, accusing Hamas of continuing to stonewall Israel rather than make a good faith effort at compromise. Saying that Israel was continuing to prepare to expand its offensive into Rafah, despite increasingly strident warnings from the international community against such a move. Israel and Hamas, which both have delegations in Qatar this week hammering out details of a potential 40-day truce, have said there is still a big gulf between them, and the Qatari mediators say there is no breakthrough yet. Netanyahu pledged that Israel would get back all the hostages held in Gaza, "with or without a framework," and said that he was demanding to see the names of all hostages to be released before he agreed to a hostage deal.

## **Israel Claims More West Bank Land for Settlements**

Israel appropriated approximately 652 acres of land in the West Bank, east of Jerusalem, escalating tensions over settlement expansion in the region. The Civil Administration, a branch of Israel's Defense Ministry, announced the land would now be part of the Maale Adumim settlement. This land, previously categorized as "survey land", is undergoing assessment to determine its current use for cultivation or pasture. If found unused, it can be declared state land, opening it up for development. The appropriated tracts were within the municipal territories of the Palestinian towns of Abu Dis and Al-Azariya, yet not registered as private property. Individuals claiming ownership of this land now face a 45-day period to present their cases in an IDF military court. While the appropriation does not guarantee immediate settlement construction, it significantly increases the likelihood of future development on these lands. The international community, supporting Palestinian aspirations for statehood in territories captured by Israel in 1967, largely considers the settlements illegal.

Ha'aretz

## **Two Israelis Killed in Shooting Attack Near Eli Settlement**

Two Israelis were killed in a shooting attack at a gas station at the entrance to the West Bank settlement of Eli. The owner of a nearby restaurant shot the terrorist and was then joined by the security forces and other civilians who arrived at the scene. The two victims were identified as 57-year-old Yitzhak Zeiger and 16-year-old Uria Hartum. According to Magen David Adom emergency services, the two were in a car when they were shot and were found at the scene in critical condition. They were pronounced dead a short time later. The terrorist involved in the attack was identified as Mahmoud Manassera, 31 years old, from the Qalandiya refugee camp. Manassera is linked to Fatah, and according to a security source, he was an officer in the Palestinian police. Between 2018 and 2019, he served a prison sentence in Ofer prison in Israel for trafficking weapons.

Jerusalem Post

## **PA Receives \$114 Million From Israel, Norway Says**

The Palestinian Authority (PA) has received 407 million shekels (\$114 million) from Israel, with more funds on the way in the coming days following a deal to release frozen tax funds, the Norwegian government said. Norway, on February 18, said it had agreed to assist in the transfer of funds earmarked for the PA that were collected by Israel, providing crucial funding to the Western-backed entity. "This money is absolutely necessary to prevent the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, to ensure that the Palestinians receive vital services and that teachers and health workers are paid," Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Stoere said. The PA exercises limited self-governance in the West Bank. Under interim peace accords reached in the 1990s, Israel's finance ministry collects tax on behalf of the Palestinians and makes monthly transfers to the PA.

## **US Officials Wary of Israeli Military Push Into Lebanon**

US intelligence officials and senior members of the Biden administration expressed concern over a possible IDF incursion into Lebanon if diplomatic efforts to remove Hezbollah terrorists from the border fail, CNN reported. "We are operating in the assumption that an Israeli military operation is in the coming months," one senior Biden administration official said. "Not necessarily imminently in the next few weeks but perhaps later this spring. An Israeli military operation is a distinct possibility." "I think what Israel is doing is they are raising this threat in the hope that there will be a negotiated agreement," the official told the network. "Some Israeli officials suggest that it is more of an effort at creating a threat that they can utilize. Others speak of it more as a military necessity that's going to happen." [Read More "A Halt to Gaza Fighting Would Trigger Lebanon Ceasefire Talks, PM Says" \(Reuters\)](#)

### Al-Monitor

## **Sudan's Army Chief in Egypt as Civil War Drags On**

Sudanese army chief Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan arrived in Cairo, days after visiting Libya in an apparent attempt to mobilize regional support as the civil war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) approaches the one-year mark. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi hosted Burhan at the Ittihadiya Palace shortly after his arrival. The two leaders discussed ways to boost joint cooperation between their countries, reviewed the latest developments in Sudan and spoke about efforts aimed at ending the conflict between the Sudanese army and the paramilitary RSF, according to a statement by the Egyptian Presidency. Sisi stressed Egypt's support for the security and stability of Sudan, while Burhan thanked Egypt for receiving Sudanese civilians fleeing the war and praised Cairo's role in trying to resolve the conflict, the statement added. More than 12,000 people have been killed in Sudan since fighting erupted in April 2023 during a power struggle that resulted in the army being pitted against the RSF, led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. [Read More "US Senate Defeats Bid to Stop F-16 Fighter Jet Sale to Turkey" \(Reuters\)](#)

## **Egypt Will Need a Reconstruction Program of Its Own**

By Zvi Bar'el

- Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sissi is well aware of the dangers posed by the interlocking system that connect Gaza City, Jerusalem and Cairo, and he learned to operate within it skillfully. His strategy to cushion its toxic effects was based on cooperating with Israel regarding the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip while at the same time using the Rafah crossing between Egypt and the Strip as a pressure lever on Hamas. When the system went awry, he took drastic measures. First, in 2015, he destroyed a large proportion of the tunnels between Gaza and Sinai, flooded others with sewage and, most important, built a buffer zone several hundred meters deep that was later extended to about 3 kilometers (1.86 miles).
- As part of the buffer project, his forces flattened an area of thousands of square meters, demolishing thousands of buildings and forcing their Bedouin residents to leave. They were concentrated in the city of El-Arish and surrounding towns, which became walled towns with large numbers of military personnel. In parallel, he forged alliances with the Bedouin tribes which, in exchange for direct payments or favors, were recruited to cooperate with the Egyptian military forces against the Islamist terrorist organizations and against the illegal crossing of residents of Gaza into Sinai and terrorists from Sinai into the Strip. Sissi had to step up security and intelligence ties with Israel so that Jerusalem would let Cairo bring infantry and armored forces into northern Sinai and even operate its air force in areas that according to the Camp David Accords must remain demilitarized.
- Beginning in 2015, about two years after he took power in July 2013, he also reached binding understandings with the Hamas leadership on preventing unauthorized crossings between Gaza and Sinai. Hamas even began to station border guards forces on the Palestinian side of the Strip to physically prevent passage. This fruitful cooperation continued even during successive Israeli military operations against Hamas in Gaza. Egyptian intelligence's absolute control of the Rafah crossing as well as its "commercial" cooperation with Hamas yielded handsome profits not only for Hamas also for the Egyptian intelligence personnel who collected the official and the unofficial crossing fees in exchange for crossing permits.
- According to reports in Egyptian media outlets, these permits cost between \$2,500 and \$10,000 per person, in addition to the "toll" that Hamas charged people seeking to leave the Strip for Egypt. These arrangements are still in place today when hundreds of Gaza residents who are entitled to go to Egypt are required to pay thousands of dollars to Hala Consulting and Tourism. The Egyptian travel agency is owned by the Bedouin businessman Ibrahim al-Organi, who also won a contract to operate the trucks bringing humanitarian aid into Gaza from Sinai. The concession was awarded to Organi several years ago in exchange for his success in enlisting some Bedouin tribes in the war against the terrorist organizations alongside the Egyptian military.

- **The permit business is quite lucrative: If 250 people cross into Egypt at Rafah a day, paying \$5,000 each (on top of the official fees, which have spiked in recent weeks), that comes to more than \$1 million per day – over \$145 million since the war began, on October 7. This is only one component of the economic cooperation between Egypt and Hamas. There is also the \$500 million pledged for the Gaza reconstruction plan that Egypt began to carry out after Israel's 2021 military operation, with Israel's consent. Additional funds were promised by donor countries to build a port and to develop the natural gas fields off the coast of Gaza.**
- **But the war threw a wrench in all of this. Not only was the convenient and lucrative trade arrangement between Hamas and Egypt abruptly halted, but the Egyptian economy also suffered a serious, unexpected blow. Before the war, it was limping along – with the lingering effects of the pandemic, the Russian war in Ukraine having caused grain prices to soar, the Egyptian pound having fallen to an unprecedented low against the dollar, and the International Monetary Fund having halted loan payments to the country. The war in Gaza had a crushing effect on two crucial sources of revenue for the country's budget.**
- **The tourism industry, in which three million Egyptians are employed, and which had only just begun to recover following the pandemic, was swiftly crippled once more. Cancellations, primarily at the Red Sea resorts, hit more than 70 percent, many hotels shut down and many thousands of employees, guides and service providers found themselves out of work. The Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping and the diversion of shipping routes from the Suez Canal to the Cape of Good Hope reduced the country's revenue from the canal by an average of 40-60 percent, which translates into a loss of about four to six billion dollars a year.**
- **Egypt is not a member of the naval coalition established by the US to protect Red Sea shipping, and according to Arab media reports, it communicated directly with the Houthis, requesting that they refrain from striking ships headed for the Suez Canal. However, the Houthis apparently have not acceded to this Egyptian request, as this shipping route is still far from safe. This situation also has a direct effect on many industries in Egypt, especially the textile industry, which relies on imported raw materials from India and the Far East.**
- **At the start of the war, in acknowledgment of Egypt's important contribution to the efforts to reach a hostage deal and given its vital role as a channel for the transfer of humanitarian aid to Gaza, the IMF agreed, with prodding and support from the US, to discuss a potential \$5 billion loan to Egypt (the original request was for \$3 billion). But the IMF is not willing to forgo its demand for structural reforms in the Egyptian economy that would include the privatization of government companies, particularly those under the military's control, a further reduction of subsidies for fuel and other goods, and in the fluctuation of the Egyptian pound. In the immediate term, these demands would cause a significant reduction in the buying power of the Egyptian pound, when the current rate already stands at 30 pounds to the dollar (and nearly 70 pounds to the dollar on the black market), would mean a steep increase in the cost of basic goods, and expanded unemployment (the official rate is currently seven percent).**

- Seeing this troubling economic outlook, the United Arab Emirates is already taking steps to come to Egypt's aid. Last week, the Abu Dhabi Development Fund signed an agreement with the Egyptian government that will see the UAE invest \$35 billion in the country, with \$24 billion earmarked for a massive development project in the city of Ras al-Hika on the Mediterranean coast near Alexandria, and the rest to be invested in other projects. This is the largest deal of this kind in Egypt's history, and the first installment of \$10-15 billion is due to arrive by early next week. Egyptian Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly denied that the site was sold to Abu Dhabi and stressed that this is a business partnership in which Egypt expects to earn 35 percent on all future projects to be built on the site, for a projected \$150 billion.
- There have also been reports in Egypt that Saudi Arabia plans to acquire land in the Sharm al Sheikh area, at the Ras Gamila site near Sanafir and Tiran Islands, with an investment of tens of billions of dollars. This is important news, of course, for the Egyptian economy, which already responded with the Egyptian pound gaining against the dollar, but even if these sums are deposited very soon, that still won't solve Egypt's immediate problems, primarily its external debt of \$165 billion. According to official reports, at least, the money from the UAE is designated for investment and not for debt repayment. What Egypt needs most of all now is a long-term ceasefire in Gaza so that it can begin to repair the economic damage from the war, renew maritime traffic through the Suez Canal, bring back tourism and defuse the threat of a sudden influx of over a million Gazans from Rafah into Egyptian territory. But unlike previous military operations in which Egypt could exert its usual pressure mechanisms, Egypt's influence on the hostage deal, which has become a strategic issue, is limited. Nor does it trust that the Israeli government will agree to a ceasefire, and it is not confident that Washington can compel Israel to do so.



## **What the World Will Remember**

By Sima Kadmon

- **Distorted, false, excessive, one-sided—none of it matters. even if it was Hamas that killed more than 100 Gazans, and even if the trucks carrying supplies had, in a panic, rammed into the mob, or even if the Israeli tank fired at a few dozen Palestinians who ran toward it and was unable to distance them. It also doesn't matter if the IDF's "contribution" to the killing was tiny, as Israel described, of seven to ten Palestinians, or whether it was more. The IDF inquiry will probably not be able to moderate the picture from Gaza, a UAV photograph showing hundreds of tiny figures, like little ants, running from side to side.**
- **For a moment they appeared to be running for their lives, and a moment later, to be swooping on something, like birds for crumbs. This picture, broadcast throughout the world, is what will remain in memory, with its headline: hundreds of Gaza residents, among them women and children, starving and desperate, pounce on food and are shot by IDF soldiers. Never mind the truth. Nobody seeks that. Intentions also don't matter: so what if all Israel wanted was to send humanitarian aid to the Gazan people?**
- **What the world sees is a starving people. Children, women, the elderly and the ill, crying out for food. Some think that this picture will create a turning point in the war, as incidents in past wars did, Kafr Kana [in Lebanon], for example. They think that this incident will exert international pressure that Israel will not be able to withstand, including from the White House. The security cabinet talked about civilian aid for months, who would send it, how it would work. One thing was clear: provisions for civilians could not be left in Hamas' hands because that would ensure it remaining in control.**
- **The pilot discussed by the security cabinet for bringing supplies into the northern Gaza Strip and providing aid without involving Hamas was tried. Those talks went on for a long time because their significance was that this was part of the discussion over the day after, a discussion that Netanyahu is opposed to holding with all his might. Was this another IDF failure, something unplanned, without forethought? What did they think would happen when the aid arrived, that hungry people could be controlled? That a mother willing to risk her life in order to bring a slice of bread to her children could be stopped? Someone did not correctly predict the Gaza civilians' reaction. Someone did not comprehend the depth of their suffering, the power of a hunger lasting months. In other words: someone made sure not to think about the day after.**
- **Following are some sentences that can no longer be said about the military draft bill: "Actually, more Haredim are enlisting;" "you can't change the behavior of 75 years in one day;" "the army doesn't want them anyway;" "but the Haredim volunteer to Zaka and to Magen David Adom." Those sentences don't work anymore. Nobody is buying them, not even the Haredim. A poll conducted last week showed that two thirds of respondents, 67%, believe that Haredim should also enlist, versus 12% who were opposed. When the fact that these 12% were Haredim is taken into account—the situation is clear.**



- Gallant's announcement that the security establishment would not introduce a military draft bill that did not meet with the consent of the entire coalition, was a brave act. True, we might wonder if this was bravery or a political gambit, as happens frequently in politics. Did Gallant make his speech because he thought, or because someone told him, that if he introduced the bill as is, the stain would stick to him forever? What he did with his speech was to pass the buck, to Gantz in this case. He did not say that he would not vote against the bill. He said that the security establishment would not introduce it.
- And what if someone else introduced it, how would he vote? But why downplay Gallant's finest hour, when nobody from the Likud did anything, not even those who presume to succeed Netanyahu, the same dishrags who maintain silence even though a large majority of the coalition views the present time as a historic opportunity to arrange the matter of the draft. It should be stressed that there is a difference between previous arguments over drafting Haredim to the current argument: this time, this is not an argument over principle, over the place of Torah, over rights and obligations. All these are worth debating, but they are not the point right now. The defense minister and the chief of staff are saying that there is something more urgent. They say that the IDF needs soldiers. The Haredi draft-dodging cannot continue because we don't have enough army to provide security to Israel's citizens.
- Gallant provided the key—veto right—to Gantz. But they both know what the problem is with the plan that Gantz presented recently. Lapid diagnosed it this week from the Knesset podium: "with this plan," he said, "not a single Haredi will enlist." The plan that was written before October 7 does not solve the problem. Rather it circumvents it in dozens of paragraphs and subsections. It could be that this is what Netanyahu intends to do. He, together with the Haredim, intends to tell Gantz that his plan is good, let's tone it down a bit and introduce it for a first reading. When it reaches the High Court of Justice, the state will say—no problem, we're working on it—and hopefully the High Court of Justice will give the state an extension. And then they will start taking parts out of it, emptying it of content.
- Netanyahu is counting on Gantz continuing to be a patsy. He began his campaign with a press conference in which he promised Gallant that he would set Haredi draft targets, by saying that it is impossible to have complete consensus, and primarily, he explained that now was not the time to be dragged into elections. Because of the war, of course. What else? But Israel does not have to set draft targets. The plan that it needs is much simpler: the Haredim have to enlist. Those who do not, will not get a penny from the State of Israel. That's all. it is unthinkable that our children be killed in wars defending the country while their children are not. And it is even more unthinkable that we should pay them for this.