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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Thursday, March 28*

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# **News Excerpts**

March 28, 2023

## **Israel National News**

### **A-G : Yeshiva Students Should Be Drafted to the Army**

The State of Israel's response to the Supreme Court regarding the Haredi Draft Law was distributed to the government ministries in preparation for its submission, and it states that "we must prepare to draft yeshiva students and to cease support [for yeshivas] - as early as next Sunday". Attorney-General Gali Baharav-Miara stated in her response that the government will not be able to provide support to yeshivas whose students do not serve in the army - after a short period of adaptation to the new situation. The response was published shortly after Baharav-Miara reacted strongly to a letter sent by Cabinet Secretary Yossi Fuchs to the Cabinet ministers, in which he accused her and the Minister of Defense for the fact that the Cabinet did not vote on the Draft Law. [Read More "Meeting Between Netanyahu, Haredi Parties on Conscription Law Ends Without Agreement" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## **Times of Israel**

### **Israel Preparing for Rafah Operation in Mid-April or May**

Following the failure of the latest round of negotiations in Qatar, Israel is not willing to make any further concessions to Hamas and is gearing up for an invasion of Rafah after Eid al-Fitr — the three-day holiday that follows Ramadan and ends around April 12 — or in early May at the latest, according to Egyptian sources who have been in contact with IDF officials, quoted by the pro-Hezbollah Al-Akhbar daily. The ground op inside the last bastion of Hamas in the Gaza Strip would last between four and eight weeks, the sources say and would be accompanied by an evacuation of the civilian population sheltering in Rafah, which amounts to about 1.5 million people, toward the center of the Strip along specific routes and at specific times, announced to civilians in each area of Rafah in advance. The mass evacuation would be monitored from the ground and the air to ensure that no Hamas fighters or Israeli hostages are hidden among the Gazan civilians, the Egyptian officials say.

## **Ha'aretz**

### **Israeli Soldier Killed in Southern Gaza Combat**

An Israeli soldier was killed during combat operations in the southern Gaza Strip, according to a statement released by the IDF. Staff Sgt. Nisim Kachlon, 21, from Hadera, was killed during a confrontation with terrorists in southern Gaza. He served as a combat soldier in the 435th Battalion of the Givati Brigade. Kachlon is the 597th Israeli soldier killed since October 7. He is the 253rd Israeli soldier killed since the start of the ground operation in Gaza, which according to the IDF began on October 27. [Read More "Netanyahu Says Hamas Should Understand International Pressure on Israel Will Not Work" \(Reuters\)](#)

## **Spain Air Drops 26 Tons of Humanitarian Aid to Gaza**

Spanish military planes airdropped 26 tons of humanitarian aid to Palestinians in the besieged Gaza Strip and Madrid called on Israel to open land border crossings to prevent a famine, the Foreign Ministry said. The operation, carried out in coordination with Jordan and co-financed by the European Union, dropped more than 11,000 food rations to alleviate the "catastrophic levels of food insecurity" faced by up to 1.1 million people in Gaza, the ministry said in a statement. "Spain insists on the opening of the land crossings as an indispensable measure to avoid a famine situation," it added. Other Western countries, including the United States, France and Germany, have also resorted to airdrops to deliver aid to ease the humanitarian crisis in Gaza after nearly six months of war between Israeli forces and Hamas militants. Aid agencies say deliveries into Gaza, much of which has been laid to waste by Israeli bombardments, have been held up by bureaucratic obstacles and insecurity since the start of the war on Oct. 7, 2023.

## **Netanyahu Sending Delegation to White House for Talks**

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is planning to send two top Israeli officials to Washington as early as next week for talks about a possible military operation in Rafah, according to four US and Israeli officials. It's a sharp reversal by Netanyahu who on Monday canceled the same trip by the same people in protest over the US not vetoing a UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza and the release of hostages held by Hamas. The fallout over the canceled trip and a deadlock in hostage talks added to already spiraling relations between Netanyahu and the Biden administration. "The Prime Minister's office has agreed to reschedule the meeting dedicated to Rafah," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said, adding that the discussions about Rafah are "urgent." A US official said canceling the trip and the rhetoric around it was "an unnecessary drama on Netanyahu's part." A senior Israeli official said: "Bibi made a mistake."

## **Poll: Majority in US Disapprove of Israeli Action in Gaza**

A poll by Gallup found a shift of general public opinion in the US toward disapproving of Israeli military action in Gaza, as compared to a survey earlier in the war taken in the month of November. The shift made the partisan split even more evident, with 64% of Republicans approving of Israel's military action taken since October 7, as opposed to just 18% of Democrats, and Independents in the middle at 29%. These numbers were compared to a similar Gallup poll conducted in November. Republicans had overwhelmingly supported Israel's military response in Gaza, with 71% approving and just 23% disapproving. On the other hand, Democrats even in November had only 36% approval and 63% disapproval. Now, in March, the numbers moved to 18% approval and 75% disapproval, with 7% giving no opinion.

## **IDF Using Facial Recognition to Detain Suspects in Gaza**

Israel has arrested hundreds of Palestinian suspects in the Gaza Strip using an experimental, artificial intelligence-powered surveillance apparatus, the [New York Times](#) reported, citing unnamed “Israeli intelligence officers, military officials and soldiers.” The newspaper cited four intelligence officers as saying the program relies on Google Photos and technology — developed by private Israeli company Corsight AI — to identify faces in crowds and low-quality drone footage. According to the paper, three people with knowledge of the program said they were speaking out about it because they considered it a “misuse of time and resources.” The tool was first used to find Israeli hostages who had been kidnapped to Gaza, but has increasingly been used against potential suspects in Gaza, the newspaper reported, saying that it is employed, among others, by the army’s 8200 cybersecurity unit. The Times interviewed one Gazan, 31-year-old poet Mosab Abu Toha, who said that on November 19, Israeli security forces pulled him out of a crowd marching through a military checkpoint. Abu Toha, who said he has no connection to Hamas, told the Times that he was later blindfolded and interrogated.

### The Media Line

## **Jordanian Police Push Back Rioters Near Israeli Embassy**

Residents of the Jordanian capital of Amman reported that dozens of protestors were arrested or beaten by riot police while hundreds attempted to make their way towards the Israeli embassy complex in the Rabae neighborhood. The Israeli diplomatic facilities are heavily guarded and have often served as a staging ground for anti-Israel protests in the country. Protestors have gathered here daily, but the latest incident represents an escalating situation. The demonstrations, which as of that evening numbered over 2000 in number, reportedly center on internal frustration regarding what many in Jordan see as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause given Jordan’s historically strong relationship with Israel compared to other states in the region and the ongoing war in Gaza. Those at the scene were heard chanting pro-Hamas slogans, including phrases such as: “Oh Hamas, all of Jordan’s people are behind you.” The Jordanian authorities have referenced these protests and expressed concern that Israel’s actions in Gaza threaten to fan the rising tide of violent political Islamism in the generally stable Hashemite kingdom. Similarly, a large population of Jordanians is Palestinian in origin, and protests in the country have been extremely intense and widespread since Hamas’ October 7 attack spurred Israel’s successive air campaign and ground invasion.

## **Tactical Achievements, Strategic Complications**

By Yoav Limor

- The unusually large rocket salvo fired at Kiryat Shmona and the death of the civilian, Zahar Bashara, put the difficult situation in the north in the headlines for a moment. Six months into the war, Israel has chalked up impressive tactical achievement against Hizbullah, but is mired in a complicated strategic situation with no solution in sight. The heavy barrage on Kiryat Shmona, which damaged buildings and other property, was the result of a concentrated salvo of several dozen rockets, some of which carried heavy payloads. Hizbullah has fired hundreds of rockets of various kinds in the last few months. These rockets are considered statistical weapons [as opposed to precise], like a flying barrel filled with explosives, and were originally earmarked for use in demolishing fortifications on IDF bases, and today are used to magnify the damage to civilian communities.
- The damage to civilians in northern Israel has been immense, and its scale is far greater than what has been reported. The damage is in four layers. The first—physical casualties: 20 people have been killed so far, civilians and soldiers. Second—physical damage to houses, buildings, and factories. Third—direct and indirect damage to agriculture. Fourth—the damage to the civilians who were evacuated from their homes and have suffered in every possible way: employment, studies, mental health and the disintegration of rural and urban communities. The Israeli government, for reasons of its own, has chosen to turn its back on the north and its residents. The number of ministers who have visited northern Israel can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Some of them refuse to take phone calls from mayors and council chairpersons.
- No designated administration similar to the Tekuma Authority, which was formed to handle the western Negev, has been formed for the north, and the handling of the various problems is divided among several ministries, and often gets lost between them. The outcome is the residents' ever-growing distrust of the government. Every evacuee from northern Israel whom you will meet will first ask you when they are going home and, if they have children, where to register them for the next school year. Many will probably choose to continue where they are living now, meaning that they will return to the north (if they return), only in the summer of 2025. This means that this region, which was short on resources and received less attention even before the war, will be badly damaged and it will take decades to rehabilitate it.
- The way to rehabilitate it, and to receive more decent care from the government, is to distance the Hizbullah threat from the border. The IDF has racked up several achievements in that regard, most of which have not been publicly revealed. It has broken some of Hizbullah's capabilities, has destroyed Hizbullah infrastructure and has killed operatives, including some from other organizations. The seven Jamaa Islamiyya operatives who were killed on Tuesday night served as Hizbullah's pretext for its rocket fire at Kiryat Shmona. Hizbullah is trying, by means of this rocket fire, to create an equation of deterrence with the IDF.

- Last week it tried to create a similar equation when it fired dozens of rockets at the Golan Heights in retaliation for the IDF strike in Baalbek. Unlike in past, the IDF did not walk into Hizbullah's trap: it intensified its retaliatory attacks, and Hizbullah (after trying once again) sought other ways to deter Israel. However, these tactical-operational victories are, in fact, indicative of Israel's deep strategic failure. Israel's security doctrine is that the fighting must be moved as quickly as possible to enemy territory. Six months into the war, and there is a security zone in the Galilee, which has been emptied of its residents.
- Nobody in Israel has a fundamental solution to the problem aside from either an agreement (which Hizbullah would not honor) or war (which neither side wants). In order to prepare for war, and also to deter Hizbullah, the IDF has accelerated its preparations. A course for high-ranking officers was completed in which war plans and lessons from the fighting in Gaza were presented. Some of them were relevant to the north, others not. The two theaters are very different topographically, in fire range, and the enemy's combat style. And yet, it's good to know that there is at least one organization in Israel that learns while fighting, with the goal of improving and planning for the future.

## **Stagnation in Israel-Hamas Talks Could Turn Conflict with Hezbollah to Full-Scale War**

By Amos Harel

- The temperature on the Israel-Lebanon border continues to rise, but so far it has somehow stayed below the threshold of all-out war. Had we been told a year ago that missiles would be continually launched into Israeli territory from Lebanon for almost six months, that 60,000 Israeli border-area residents would be forced to leave their homes, and Israel would count more than 20 dead and Lebanon almost 350 – we'd have assumed with a strong degree of certainty that this would mean war. And yet, Israel and Hezbollah continue to avoid a general confrontation, even if that is liable to change later.
- The events of the past few days reflect a further escalation. Israel attacks, again and again, deep into Lebanese territory, from north of Beirut to the Bekaa Valley. Hezbollah's UAV network and some of its air defense batteries are in the crosshairs. Hezbollah responds with an unusual mass of missiles – barrages of 50 Katyushas or more – but does not match Israel by attacking 100 kilometers (62 miles) inside our territory, only firing the barrages against the Galilee, and sometimes the Golan Heights. The latest exchanges of fire were heavier than usual.
- The Air Force attacked a house with seven activists of the Sunni terrorist organization, Jamaa al-Islamiya. The seven men, whom the IDF said were going to carry out an attack at Har Dov, were killed. In the morning, an Israeli citizen, an employee at a factory in Kiryat Shmona, was killed in a missile strike on the town. Toward evening, the air force escalated its operations, and Lebanon reported more dead.
- Since the outbreak of the war, Hezbollah has preferred to avoid sending its men to try to enter Israeli territory. That is a mission given to smaller Sunni and Palestinian organizations – and, to date, the IDF has successfully blocked them. Hezbollah and its collaborators have taken heavy blows. Not just in deaths, but in systematic Israeli attacks on commanders, military sites and arms depots throughout the sector. The result is that most Radwan combatants, Hezbollah's elite force, have retreated from the border. Hezbollah's regular security brigades deployed in the south have acted similarly, on a smaller scale. At the same time, the IDF is taking care to announce that it has learned lessons from the fighting in Gaza to prepare its forces for a heavier war in Lebanon. Northern Command has been training for this in the past few days.
- The strikes against Hezbollah's UAVs and SAMs (surface-to-air missiles) go deep inside Lebanon and are intended to upgrade the air force's supremacy if a general war breaks out. But all these measures do not provide an exit from the impossible circumstances in which the residents were forced to abandon the border region. (Almost twice as many Lebanese have abandoned their villages on the other side of the border.) Seemingly, a possible exit point from the crisis is known. The American government has already explained that it intends to renew diplomatic efforts to achieve calm on the Israel-Lebanon border the moment a cease-fire is declared between Israel and Hamas in Gaza.



- But the contacts for a cease-fire and a hostage deal have deadlocked – and the freeze is also affecting the Lebanese arena, which is considered secondary, but liable to turn into the main arena and bleed more heavily.
- The North is raising interest and alarm, in view of the increased warfare. But fighting is still being waged in varying degrees of intensity on the other fronts as well. In the Gaza Strip, a Givati Brigade soldier was killed in a confrontation with terrorists in Khan Yunis. In Gaza City, the IDF is imposing a tight siege on Shifa Hospital, where dozens of Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants are still holed up, including, apparently, some senior members. In the West Bank, a large military force raided the Jenin refugee camp, killing militants. The army announces every day that terror attacks have been thwarted and Hamas operatives have been arrested throughout the West Bank. All this isn't getting in the cabinet's way of focusing on what is really important – the vociferous squabble with the Biden administration, and the complex political maneuvering in a bid to evade an explosion between Likud and the ultra-Orthodox parties, which are having trouble getting their voters to accept legislation exempting ultra-Orthodox men from the draft.
- In Jerusalem, the disinformation offensive about the vote in the UN Security Council and the hostage deal continued. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's aides claimed Hamas had rejected the American compromise proposal about the hostages because the organization was exploiting the crisis between Israel and the United States over the Americans' refusal to veto the Security Council's resolution. The Biden administration denied this, noting Hamas had refused the proposal before the vote.
- After punishing the Americans by canceling the diplomatic delegation's visit to Washington to discuss the disagreements over the planned operation in Rafah "to send a message to Hamas", Netanyahu backtracked and asked to coordinate the visit again. Officials in Jerusalem claimed the Americans were the ones who had asked for the meeting. Washington denied this right away. Let the readers decide whose version is more reliable. The responses to the crisis with Washington were made at the same time as the feverish talks with the ultra-Orthodox parties were held, in a bid to solve the ultra-Orthodox draft exemption issue. It's hard to understand how the families of the hostages being held in Gaza, or the parents of soldiers still fighting in Gaza and on the Lebanese border, can remain silent in view of these goings-on.
- Soldiers are being killed almost every day, hostages are rotting in the Gaza tunnels, and the cabinet is busy arranging a sweeping exemption from any army service for tens of thousands of young ultra-Orthodox men – in fact, for hundreds of thousands of them, until the end of time. At least enough angry citizens gathered to disrupt the speeches of two ministers at a real estate conference in Eilat, whose very convention at this time is peculiar. It was the spontaneous response that the ministers had encountered everywhere they went in the first weeks after the terrible fiasco, which Netanyahu himself refuses to admit responsibility for even half a year later. Maybe it's time to renew the tradition.