



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and Middle East News Update

Friday, March 29

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News Excerpts

March 29, 2023

Ynet News

Israeli's Court Stops Funding to Haredis Not Serving in IDF

Israel's high court issued a temporary order to the government to stop funding ultra-Orthodox Yeshiva students as of Monday, until a new bill is passed formalizing their service or exemption from service in the IDF. The ultra-Orthodox, Israel's fastest-growing religious minority, have a waiver from conscription designed to keep their men in Yeshivas. The Supreme Court scrapped this in 2018 in the name of equality. The Knesset failed to come up with a new arrangement, and a government-issued stay on mandatory conscription of the ultra-Orthodox expires on Sunday. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu asked the court for an extension of 30 days to come up with a bill that would satisfy both his Attorney General and his ultra-Orthodox coalition partners but was unable to prevent the order. AG Gali Baharav-Miara, wrote in a submission to the court that she saw no legal basis for deferring the ultra-Orthodox conscriptions further.

Jerusalem Post

Bibi Rejected Gaza Deal Before Meeting Hostage Families

The families of the soldiers held hostage by Hamas criticized Prime Minister Netanyahu's strategy for ensuring their loved one's release, a spokesperson from the Hostage and Missing Families forum announced. Their statements come following a meeting between the families and Netanyahu. The families, who have not seen or heard from their children in 174 days, have repeatedly called on Netanyahu to do more to ensure the release of their loved ones. Channel 12 reported that the head of the Mossad, David Barnea, claimed that there was a possibility of a deal, but Netanyahu dismissed it. This report revealed that there was a conflict in Wednesday's war cabinet meeting. Barnea informed the cabinet that despite Hamas's dismissal of a hostage deal, there remains a possibility of achieving some progress. Still, the deal would heavily rely on the ability of Gazan residents to return to northern Gaza.

Reuters

IDF Play with Gaza Women's Underwear in Online Posts

Israeli soldiers have been posting photos and videos of themselves toying with lingerie found in Palestinian homes, creating a dissonant visual record of the war in Gaza as a looming famine intensifies world scrutiny of Israel's offensive. The two videos shot by Israeli soldiers are among dozens of posts in which troops in Gaza are shown displaying lingerie, mannequins, and in some cases both. The lingerie images have been viewed tens of thousands of times - nearly half a million in one case - after being reposted by Younis Tirawi, who describes himself as a Palestinian reporter. Approached about images he reposted to his more than 100,000 followers on X between Feb. 23 and March 1, Tirawi provided links to the original posts by IDF soldiers. Reuters then independently verified eight posted on Instagram or YouTube.

Hamas Is Preparing for Rafah Op, Denies Holding up Talks

Hamas began preparing for an Israeli ground operation into Gaza's southernmost city of Rafah, according to a report published by the Al-Araby Al-Jadeed. According to the report, citing a Hamas leader, coordination was underway "emphasizing not to allow the breaking of resistance in Gaza under any circumstances, no matter what it costs." The unnamed Hamas leader also addressed the ceasefire and hostage release negotiations, denying Israeli reports that the terrorist organization refused proposals put forward by mediators. The source claimed Hamas showed flexibility on the issue of female soldiers by increasing the number to be released from five to 10, and moving away from its original position to only allow their release at the advanced stage of an agreement. The quoted unnamed Hamas leader went on to blame Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu for the lack of progress in talks, as well as Israel's refusal to end the war with a withdrawal of its military, and a larger return of Gazans to their residences in north Gaza.

Times of Israel

US General Says Israel Not Getting All Weapons It Asks For

The United States' top general said that Israel had not received every weapon it has asked for, in part because some of it could affect the US military's readiness and there were capacity limitations. Washington gives \$3.8 billion in annual military assistance to Israel, its longtime ally. The US has been rushing air defenses and munitions to Israel, but some Democrats and Arab American groups have criticized the Biden administration's steadfast support of Israel, which they say provides it with a sense of impunity. The Biden administration has grown increasingly critical of Israel in public in recent weeks as the war in Gaza has ground on, threatening to not back the country should it move ahead with a full-scale invasion of the southern Gaza city of Rafah, Hamas's last major stronghold. With elections looming in November, Biden's Democratic Party has sought to show itself as not overly supportive of Israel in hopes of winning over voters unhappy with its backing for the IDF until now.

Associated Press

PA Announces a New Cabinet as It Faces Calls for Reform

The Palestinian Authority has announced the formation of a new Cabinet as it faces international pressure to reform. President Mahmoud Abbas announced the new government in a presidential decree. Abbas tapped Mohammad Mustafa, a longtime adviser, to be prime minister earlier this month. Mustafa, a politically independent US-educated economist, had vowed to form a technocratic government and create an independent trust fund to help rebuild Gaza. Mustafa will also serve as foreign minister. At least five of the incoming 23 ministers are from Gaza, but it was not immediately clear if they are still in the territory. The PA has little popular support or legitimacy among Palestinians, in part because it has not held elections in 18 years. Its policy of cooperating with Israel on security matters is extremely unpopular and has led many Palestinians to view it as a subcontractor of the occupation.

Jordanians Protest Peace Treaty with Israel in Fresh Rallies

Thousands of Jordanians rallied near the Israeli embassy in a fifth day of large protests against Israel, calling for an end to Jordan's unpopular peace treaty with its neighbor to the west. The protesters in an affluent neighborhood of Amman carried Palestinian flags and chanted: "They said Hamas is terrorist. All of Jordan is Hamas." "No Zionist embassy on Jordanian land," protesters also cried, demanding that authorities close the embassy and end a 1994 peace treaty that normalized ties with Israel. Placards declared "Amman-Gaza one destiny", while other posters depicted Hamas' masked military spokesman, Abu Obaida, who has become a folk hero for many in the Arab world. The Israeli embassy, where protesters have gathered for five straight days, has long been a flashpoint when violence has escalated between Palestinians and Israel. Heavy security was aimed at curbing the number of protesters, and the rally went peacefully, unlike earlier this week when riot police fired tear gas and struck protesters with batons to prevent them from storming the embassy. Authorities in Jordan have stepped up arrests and harassment of demonstrators in a months-long campaign that has been slammed by international rights groups Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch for restricting freedom of expression. Passions have run high among Jordanians, many of whom are of Palestinian origin, over Israel's relentless Gaza bombing campaign against Hamas that has killed tens of thousands of civilians, according to Gaza officials, and flattened many parts of the densely populated enclave.

Dozens Killed in Alleged Israeli Air Strikes in Syria

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says that at least 36 people - including civilians and military personnel - were killed in air strikes near Aleppo International Airport in northwestern Syria. The Syrian Defense Ministry said that the attacks were launched by Israel and militant groups and that they targeted several areas in Aleppo's countryside, the ministry said in a statement. The Syrian Observatory added that the strikes targeted a Hezbollah arms depot and a Syrian military facilities. The strikes coincided with drone attacks carried out from Idlib and western rural Aleppo that the ministry described as having been conducted by "terrorist organizations" targeting civilians in Aleppo and its surroundings. "The aggression resulted in the martyrdom and injury of a number of civilians and military personnel and caused material losses to public and private property," the statement said. Two security sources said that the strikes also killed five Hezbollah fighters. On Thursday, two people were injured in an Israeli airstrike in the region surrounding Syria's capital Damascus, it said. [Read More "Hezbollah Fires Rockets at North, as IDF Holds Surprise Drill for War" \(Times of Israel\)](#) ["US Military Says It Destroyed 4 Drones Launched by Yemen's Houthis" \(Reuters\)](#) ["Russian Warships Enter the Red Sea, Navy Says" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Disagreement en Route to the Abyss

By Nahum Barnea

- What began as a childish tantrum ended in childish capitulation. The adolescent who ran out of the house screaming returned silently, through the back door, hungry for supper leftovers. It isn't good when the White House views the Israeli prime minister as the enemy. It's a lot worse, and much more damaging when the White House considers him to be a joke. When Netanyahu stopped Dermer and Hanegbi on their way to the plane, I wrote that the National Security Council in Washington heard about this with a smile. They laughed all the way to his capitulation. Biden wanted to learn how Israel planned to attack the Hamas battalions in Rafah given that 1.5 million displaced persons and about 800,000 locals live there in crowded conditions.
- The idea was that Hanegbi would say that the last time he planned an operation in Rafah was when he climbed the water tower in Yamit before the peace treaty was signed with Egypt and lied that he was about to commit suicide. Dermer would say: I completed my military studies in the Jewish community in Miami Beach. The composition of the delegation was Netanyahu's real punishment for the White House. The disgraceful situation in Washington will have dire consequences for the efforts to free the hostages. Sinwar is, without a doubt, the scoundrel in this story. But the developments on the Israeli side haven't boded well either—including in the eyes of the American mediator. The war cabinet met on Wednesday night again to discuss the negotiations and the scope of the mandate that it would give to the Israeli delegation.
- As expected, the decision made was to wait. Maybe Hamas and the mediators would come up with a new proposal. In the meantime, the hostages are dying and the army is standing in place. The most current assessment is that half of the hostages are no longer alive. That is an assessment. I hope it gets proved wrong. But if there is anyone on the Israeli side who is playing for time, they are criminals. The Israeli delegation to the talks is now divided into two, with Mossad Director David Barnea on one side, and Maj. Gen. (res.) Nitzan Alon on the other side. Both are outstanding people who want their every fiber to secure the hostages' release. I don't know of any personal fight between them, but the assessments that they have voiced in closed-door meetings point to a major disagreement that will be hard to settle. Hovering above this disagreement is the image of the figure of Netanyahu, an enigma.
- One side views that as promising; the other views it as disruptive. If I understand correctly, Barnea (no relation) is certain that Sinwar is playing for time and that he does not want an agreement. Barnea reached this conclusion two weeks ago after meeting with CIA Director Burns in Jordan and unrelated to this meeting. The Hamas delegates said they were willing to make progress and Israel couldn't say no either to an American request or to the hostages' families. Netanyahu gave Barnea a broader mandate than the security cabinet had given him in the past.

- He was told that he could negotiate on the number of prisoners who would be released in the next round, the return of the displaced Palestinians to the northern Gaza Strip (number, age, gender) and the deployment of IDF troops during the ceasefire. Hamas insisted on no inspections of people moving north, ending the fighting with international guarantees and the IDF's withdrawal from the entire Gaza Strip. Hamas also insisted on the same number of prisoners that it demanded at the start of the talks in the Paris meeting. The Mossad director had hoped that the military pressure would prompt Sinwar to modify his position. That did not happen either because the army hadn't yet reached places that might influence Sinwar or because Sinwar is immune to influence.
- Barnea became convinced that Sinwar's plan was to get through Ramadan without an agreement. An agreement would not be good for either his Iranian patrons or for him. He has no interest in opening the door to normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia and to an American-Sunni-Israeli front against Iran. He negotiates Middle East-style: extorts a bit, threatens a bit, and plays for time. The assumption of those who share this view is that Netanyahu wants an agreement. The fact is, they say, he gave the Mossad director a broader mandate than is customary to think that he gave; he permitted the members of the delegation to the Cairo meetings to talk, even though he had instructed them to suffice with only listening despite the fact that he sent his own man with them as a babysitter (the adviser was asked to leave the room in some of the meetings).
- He very much wants an agreement with Saudi Arabia and is willing to pay for it by possibly parting ways with Smotrich and Ben Gvir. But for now, he has a political base and a coalition, and that is why he conceals his intentions behind tough, rejectionist rhetoric. The alternative approach is closer to that of Nitzan Alon. Alon believes that Sinwar wants a deal. Most of the Sinwar experts, if there are any Sinwar experts left in Israel, most likely endorse this approach. He has been completely consistent: the single significant change in his terms is that he permitted his representatives in Paris to agree to a gradual ceasefire with the IDF troops remaining in the Gaza Strip. And then the question of the mandate came up. Eisenkot says that the team was not given a mandate that allowed it to work. The team may not have been given a broad mandate, but Barnea was, was the answer.
- Netanyahu forbade him from telling his colleagues just how much rope that he had been given. According to this version, Netanyahu has given him rope—it cannot be said that he is sabotaging the negotiations—but he has been careful to make sure that the rope isn't long enough to truly allow for progress in the negotiations. When the delegation left for Doha early in the week, its members made it clear to Netanyahu that Hamas would respond in the negative. "Go and see," he told them. After a night in Doha, they returned empty-handed. Most of the technical team returned after them.
- And then, on Wednesday, the security cabinet met again only to decide to meet again in the next few days, to give a little more rope and to hope for the best. "Creeping devaluation" is how one well-informed source described it. The dithering in the negotiations is simultaneous with the dithering in Gaza, the dithering in Lebanon and the dithering in Washington. Everything is stuck.

- **With every further stalemate, Israel loses more cards. In my opinion, it would have been better to pay a high price, get all the hostages freed and start over. Not a total victory, a total restart. There are so many things that need to be done. But the process works differently, and the time, and the hostages.**

The Day After

By Alon Ben David

- Last week's events in the north served as a stark reminder that we're facing a security challenge greater than that of Hamas. It's been almost half a year since the start of the war and the impressive achievements at its beginning are wearing off. The political and military leadership continues to act as if we have all the time in the world. But we don't. We need to start looking north. Most of the prime minister's efforts this week were spent seeking a warped formula guaranteeing the continued draft-dodging of tens of thousands of Haredim. In the little time he had, he entangled himself and entangled us all in an unnecessary crisis with our last ally. The North's salvation will not come from Netanyahu. As far as he's concerned, the residents of the north can stay in temporary housing until it's time for them to move into senior housing.
- The most important thing is that the war in Gaza goes on forever. He understood, before everyone else, that the world wasn't going to let us conquer Rafah, and so made it into the holy grail without which there will be no "total victory." The artificial crisis he created last week with the US over the UN resolution (and we've taken much worse from the UN) revealed that Netanyahu is the last person interested in conquering Rafah. He just wants the pursuit of "total victory" that will never end. Israel rightly hoped for a more precise wording than the UN Security Council wording, making a ceasefire contingent on the hostages' return. However, the expectation that the US would veto the resolution calling for the two together was not realistic.
- A leader truly interested in defeating Hamas could have leveraged the Security Council's resolution, endorsed it fully and declared a ceasefire for the two remaining weeks of Ramadan as an allotted time period for returning the hostages. He could have, in the same breath, announced that if the UN resolution were not implemented and the hostages not returned by the end of Ramadan, Israel would view itself as free to carry on military activity as it wishes. But Netanyahu is no longer in full command of his senses. His desperate desire to hold onto his seat is clouding his vision. He canceled the delegation leaving for Washington, then recanted, but denied he recanted, and then sent the delegation. He's overseeing a war, but not the one going on in Gaza.
- From the war's outset, Netanyahu hasn't been the man managing it. The IDF presents its plans and he approves them – as he's been doing throughout his 17 years as prime minister. The problem is that now the IDF General Staff has also lost eye contact with the overall picture of the multi-theater war that we're in. The IDF has been bogged down in the tunnels of Khan Yunis for almost four months in pursuit of the Hamas leadership. Gaza City and the northern Gaza Strip, a much greater challenge, were conquered in half this time. The IDF spokesman releases daily videos of clashes with terrorists, but the truth is that the IDF is hardly advancing in the southern Gaza Strip. It's waiting for the directive to conquer the refugee camp and central Rafah. But the directive won't come.

- Six months into the outbreak of the war, the IDF must present a realistic plan as to how it's going to finish it. I believed, and still believe, that defeating Hamas's six remaining battalions in Rafah and the refugee camp was vital for achieving the goal of destroying Hamas's military power. But our unnecessary lengthy stay in Khan Yunis has changed the circumstances. The way it looks now, Israel won't have the legitimacy to conquer Rafah. In these less-than-ideal conditions, the army's task is to prepare a program to bring the attainable achievement of conquering the camps in the center and taking operational control of 90% of the Gaza Strip's territory.
- Gaza's population will be pushed to Rafah and the Al-Mawasi area and the IDF will pave three corridors bisecting the Gaza Strip – the existing corridor along Wadi Gaza, the Kissufim corridor from north of Khan Yunis and the Morag corridor to its south. Rafah will remain Hamas's final enclave, with one and a half million hungry and homeless Gazans above their heads. The international community will be invited in to provide food as it wishes and offer alternatives to the Hamas government in Rafah, but the refugees won't go back home until the hostages are returned.
- At this time, the IDF can operate relatively freely in the rest of the Gaza Strip, conducting successful operations like that in Shifa Hospital. It must be founded on raids rather than troops who stay in the Gaza Strip and it will allow us to move out troops needed on the northern border. If this move doesn't lead to a hostage deal, it means there will be war in the north. This will require the IDF's best forces and an IDF General Staff whose authority is respected by commanders in the field and isn't tarnished by the October 7 failure.
- The exchange of blows we've been conducting with Hizbullah for almost half a year has brought about many tactical achievements, but Hizbullah holds the strategic achievement of keeping the residents away from their homes. The IDF hits installations and operatives, so far killing 35, but for Hizbullah this is a reasonable price for the achievement. This has to change. I was asked last week in one of the communities in the north whether they'd be starting the school year in September 2025. The IDF must provide a single answer: Yes. In the late 1980s, as Israel started getting bogged down in the security zone in South Lebanon, Yossi Peled, the OC Northern Command, ordered inscribing in all the outposts "Mission – Protecting the Northern Communities." The time has come to inscribe this anew.