



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

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I24 News

Law Passes to Shutdown Al-Jazeera Offices in Israel

The Israeli Knesset has passed legislation granting the government temporary powers to shut down foreign news networks operating in Israel if they are deemed to threaten national security. The law, known colloquially as the "Al Jazeera law," passed with a substantial majority of 71 votes in favor and 10 against. The legislation, spearheaded by Communications Minister Shlomo Karhi, aims to provide authorities with the means to prevent foreign news outlets from operating if they are believed to be detrimental to state security. Karhi, a member of the hardline flank of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party, has affirmed that the Qatari-funded Al Jazeera channel will be among the first to be shut down under the new law. He emphasized the government's commitment to curbing what he referred to as " Hamas mouthpieces" in Israel.

Ha'aretz

Israeli Official Downbeat on Prospects for Hostage Deal

A senior Israeli official said that talks with Hamas on a hostage-prisoner exchange and cease-fire are far from coming to fruition. "We must be realistic in the talks with Hamas and not mislead the families," he said, adding, "At the moment, we are still waiting for [Hamas leader Yahya] Sinwar's position to know whether it's possible to move forward." Members of the Israeli delegation will remain in Cairo, where the talks are being held. The Israeli cabinet decided to expand the Cairo negotiating team's maneuvering room on the question of the number of Palestinians who will be allowed to enter northern Gaza so as to address its demand to allow all those who have left to go back home. A senior Israeli defense official made it clear that Israel would not accept another Hamas demand nor cancel the inspection route that would enable the IDF to verify that Hamas activists and material don't move from the southern strip to try and reestablish the organization's positions in the north.

Associated Press

Israeli Strike Kills 4 Foreign Aid Workers Delivering Food

An apparent Israeli airstrike killed four international aid workers with the World Central Kitchen charity and their Palestinian driver, hours after the group brought in a new shipload of food by a maritime route the United States has hoped would be an alternative lifeline for northern Gaza, isolated and pushed to the brink of famine by Israel's offensive. Footage showed the bodies of the five dead at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in the central Gaza town of Deir al-Balah. Several of them wore protective gear with the charity's logo. Staff showed the passports of three of the dead – British, Australian and Polish. The nationality of the fourth aid worker was not immediately known. The Israeli military said it was conducting a review "to understand the circumstances of this tragic incident."

Reuters

Officials Agree to Consider Concerns About Rafah Offensive

Israeli officials agreed to take US concerns about a planned offensive in Rafah into account, said a joint statement issued after a virtual meeting with US officials on alternative ways to root out Hamas militants in southern Gaza. The 2 1/2-hour meeting led by top US and Israeli officials concluded with a plan for follow-up talks in person as early as next week, the statement said. There was no immediate sign that the US and Israeli negotiators reached any agreement on the path forward in Rafah. President Joe Biden has urged Israel not to conduct a large-scale offensive in Rafah to avoid more Palestinian civilian casualties in Gaza, where Palestinian health authorities say more than 32,000 people have been killed in Israel's assault. US officials, concerned about a deepening humanitarian crisis in Gaza, have urged Israel to take a more targeted approach to attacking Hamas militants without launching a major ground offensive. The Israelis briefed their US counterparts on plans for an offensive to destroy Hamas' last battalions that they say can be carried out in a way that minimizes civilian casualties.

Al-Monitor

Envoy: Palestine to Bid for Full UN Membership This Month

The Palestinian ambassador to the United Nations said the State of Palestine will seek full membership in the organization this month, a move, he argues, will advance a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "It will send the message that Israel is not the party that decides whether we will have a state. It is the Palestinian people who will decide that," Riyadh Mansour said. "This is an investment in peace and an investment in saving the two-state solution." In an exclusive interview with Al-Monitor, Mansour provided details on Palestine's workings at the United Nations amid the war. Since 2012, the State of Palestine has been a permanent observer state at the UN — one of only two entities with this status, the other being the Vatican. Permanent observers can participate in meetings and maintain a presence at the UN headquarters, but cannot vote. While more than 100 countries currently recognize a Palestinian state, only Sweden and Iceland do so in Western Europe.

Ynet News

'From the Palestinian Perspective, No Alternatives to Hamas'

A survey conducted by the Palestinian Center for Survey and Policy Research, led by Dr. Khalil Shikaki, shows that Palestinian prisoner Marwan Barghouti who's responsible for the death of five Israelis, is poised to replace current Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. According to the survey, conducted both in the West Bank and in Gaza, Barghouti is considered the most popular candidate because he is "Yasser Arafat's heir - that's how the Palestinians see him." Shikaki further explained that Palestinians want Hamas to continue its rule during and after the ongoing war - and don't see any other possibility. "This was clear in the last survey and also in the current one. There were no changes, on the contrary – there was an increase in Hamas's popularity from 38% to 52%. From the Palestinian perspective, there are no alternatives at the moment."

Iran's Top Commander in Syria Killed; Tehran Blames Israel

Iran accused Israel of carrying out an airstrike on a building next to Iran's embassy in Damascus that killed seven members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, including the top Iranian commander in Syria. The strike in the Damascus-area municipality of Mezzeh hit a building adjacent to the Iranian embassy, footage showed. Though Israel has not commented on the strike, The New York Times cited four unnamed Israeli officials as confirming the country was behind the attack. A report said a building in the embassy compound was "flattened," in what it said was "a startling apparent escalation of conflict in the Middle East that would pit Israel against Iran and its allies." Iran's SSN news website said the targeted building was Iran's consulate and ambassador's residence. The IRGC in a statement carried by Iranian media announced the deaths of seven members, including its senior-most official in Syria, Mohammad Reza Zahedi, and his deputy Mohammad Haj Rahimi. Zahedi was a top commander in IRGC's Quds Force, a US-designated terrorist organization. He was reportedly responsible for the unit's operations in Syria and Lebanon, for Iranian militias there, and for ties with Hezbollah, and thus the most senior commander of Iranian forces in the two countries. Israel's Army Radio said Zahedi oversaw all Iranian terrorist operations against Israel from Syria, Lebanon "and the Palestinian sphere." His death was the most significant killing of an IRGC leader since the US assassinated Quds Force chief Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad in January 2020.

Axios

Sullivan to Meet MBS to Push Saudi Side of Israel Mega-Deal

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan will travel to Saudi Arabia to meet with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Thursday about a potential mega-deal that would include Saudi normalization with Israel. With the war in Gaza ongoing and the US presidential election just seven months away, White House officials admit there's a slim chance they can pull off the historic peace agreement. Sullivan's trip shows President Biden is still determined to pursue it. The White House continues to work toward a draft US-Saudi defense treaty and understandings related to US support for a Saudi civilian nuclear program, according to four US and Israeli officials. US officials hope to reach a bilateral agreement with the Saudis and then possibly present it to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, whose side of the deal would include committing to a path toward a two-state solution. Netanyahu would then face a choice: If he agrees, he could broker a historic peace deal with Saudi Arabia. If he says no, he could be exposed as a rejectionist and lose whatever US support he still has left. The White House declined to comment. The Saudi embassy in Washington did not respond to a request for comment. Three officials will travel to Saudi Arabia ahead of Sullivan: White House Middle East czar Brett McGurk, senior energy adviser Amos Hochstein, and State Department counselor Derek Chollet. Many in the White House think the Saudi mega-deal is a pipe dream, citing the war in Gaza, Netanyahu's dependence on his radical right-wing coalition partners, and US domestic politics. Even if a deal is reached, the Senate will have to ratify the defense treaty with Saudi Arabia and possibly the nuclear understandings.

Wishful Thinking

By Zvi Bar'el

- **"The discourse of the occupation's leaders concerning the possible formation of an international or Arab force to manage the Gaza Strip is illusionary. Any force that enters the Strip is not welcome and will not be accepted. Any such force will be regarded as an occupying entity and will be dealt with accordingly. We appreciate the position held by Arab countries that refuse to participate in this plan." This was the statement issued on behalf of the "Surveillance Committee of the National and Islamic Forces" which Hamas published Saturday in Beirut. Hamas' statement came in response to reports saying that Defense Minister Yoav Gallant discussed with his American counterpart, Lloyd Austin, the possibility of establishing an Arab Force that will manage the Strip and that three undisclosed Arab countries have agreed to participate in such a move. This idea isn't new. The option of forming a multinational Arab force was discussed in November, during US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit to the region and was met with the same reaction by Hamas**
- **Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi also clarified then that Jordan has no intention of sending its forces into Gaza. Egypt and Saudi Arabia responded – announcing that they would not participate in such a move. It's doubtful that anything has changed since. According to the responses received in the last two days from the latter three countries, it's hard to conceive that anytime soon – if indeed anytime at all – Arab militaries armed with US weapons will govern the Strip.**
- **To the extent that there's an "Arab consensus" concerning Gaza's management, it relies on the claim that the Palestinian Authority or any Palestinian body agreed upon by the Palestinian leadership holds the legitimacy to do it. Here also lies the heart of the dispute between the American position – which tries convincing Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to agree to have the PA manage the Strip – and Israel, which vetoes any possibility of the PA controlling both Gaza and the West Bank. This isn't only because Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu considers the PA as just another terrorist entity that is, in essence, no different from Hamas, but mainly because a Palestinian government that unites the West Bank with the Gaza Strip will legitimate the establishment of a Palestinian State.**
- **After all, this was the threat against which Israel's long-term strategy was conceived and which fostered Hamas' regime in Gaza, serving as a barrier against the PA and the PLO from being considered the sole representatives of all Palestinians. However, if at the beginning of the war the discussions between the US and Israel about postwar Gaza sounded less urgent, and President Biden's vision concerning the two-state solution seemed like a slogan designed to satisfy the Palestinian and Arab demand for a "balanced" position, the horrifying reality in Gaza has changed it. The humanitarian crisis, which in other wars such as in Syria, Sudan or Yemen, was secondary if not marginal, turned out to be a crucial strategic minefield in the current Gaza war and dictated how the war eventually unfolded.**

- It destroyed Israel's international status and did much of the same to the United States, especially in the Middle East. Now it seems there's no possibility of separating the necessary effort of providing aid to Gaza's approximately 2.3 million residents and coming to an agreement concerning who will manage it. Mahmoud Abbas isn't alone in his claim that any PA rule over Gaza would require international – mainly American – support. The same is demanded by all the relevant Arab countries. This position, however, isn't much different from the American one, which holds that the United States will continue delivering aid to Gaza, establish the temporary port and pressure Israel to open more border crossings to increase the scope of aid entering the Strip. However, American forces won't be the ones entering. What works best for Washington is also good for Cairo, Riyadh and Amman.
- From the perspective of the Arab countries, even if they agree to send troops to Gaza, the authority on the ground should be that of the PA, which should "invite" their involvement for it to be legitimate. There's no certainty that even if Abbas does ask for assistance that these countries would immediately comply. Because, unlike multinational forces in other parts of the world such as in the Balkans and Africa, an Arab force that arrives in the Strip while still under Israeli control will be seen as aiding the occupation and working with the United States to dissolve the PA's legitimacy. This only shows how unrealistic it would be for Israel or the United States to become the source of authority for the invitation of Arab forces into Gaza. The issue is that despite Abbas' recent statements, in which he emphasized that the PA is capable of "standing up to the task" of managing Gaza, these claims still need proof. In the PA military training centers in the West Bank, recruits continue to train in the use of protest dispersal methods. But for about a year now, they haven't received live ammunition for training, their budgets are poor and their instructors' salaries are only partially paid.
- The commander of the PA security forces training center in Jericho told the Washington Post in March that about 400,000 bullets for pistols are being held in Jordan for Israel's approval and that other training and combat equipment is also being delayed. According to the Washington Post, the PA has approximately 35,000 conscripts serving in policing and administrative roles throughout the West Bank. Before Hamas took over the Strip in 2007, the PA deployed about 26,000 security personnel in Gaza. Recently, with US backing, the PA re-examined its lists of security personnel in Gaza and reached a number ranging from 2000 to 3000 who are fit for duty, but it's not clear how many of them are still alive.
- Talking to the Washington Post, the commander in Jericho added that if he gets the technical capabilities, the needed logistics and the political decisions that would support him, the option of being deployed in Gaza can be discussed. None of this has been settled yet. Even if a political decision is made to allow an armed Palestinian force to enter Gaza, one can only imagine the complexity of the needed coordination with the IDF. This would include, among many other challenges, the establishment of rules of engagement accepted by both sides, movement routes and rules of engaging Hamas members and other terrorist groups.

- **This will all be needed for the immediate purpose of delivering humanitarian aid to the Strip, before proceeding to rebuilding houses, hospitals, schools and essential infrastructure. This whole enterprise will become much more complex, to the point of being impossible, if Saudi, Jordanian and Egyptian forces also arrive in the Strip. In international military coalitions established by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, it was clear who was the "supreme commander." In Gaza, however, it's hard to imagine that Saudi or Egyptian forces would agree to be instructed by an Israeli general. These difficulties play well into the hands of Israel, which – as Netanyahu said – intends to stay in Gaza "as long as it takes," without a time limit and without a road map to ending the war.**

Israel's Conflict with Iran and Hezbollah

By Amos Harel

- The death of Hassan Mahdavi (also known as Mohammad Reza Zahedi), the commander of the Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force in Syria and Lebanon, brings Israel's confrontation with Iran and Hezbollah to a new pinnacle. This may be the most dangerous development on the northern front since the war in Gaza began almost six months ago. Mahdavi was the most senior Iranian figure whose assassination has been attributed to Israel. The overall Quds Force commander, Qassem Soleimani, was assassinated in January 2020 by the Americans, with claims that this was partly based on intelligence provided by Israel.
- Mahdavi, who was 63, was a familiar figure in Syria and Lebanon for almost 30 years. According to Shimon Shapira, who researches Hezbollah, Mahdavi was considered to be particularly close to Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, serving as the liaison between him and Tehran, and as someone who was very knowledgeable about Hezbollah operations. Like other senior figures in the Quds Force, he belonged to the generation that participated in Iran's Islamic Revolution at the end of the 1970s and the war with Iraq in the '80s. Later, he and his associates tried to export the revolution to the Arab and Muslim world. Lebanon is the first country where Iran had significant success, via its support of Hezbollah.
- Israel's intelligence community believes that Iran and Hezbollah knew about Hamas' plan to carry out a murderous terror attack on Israeli communities along the Gaza border, but Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar didn't share with them the specific date of the attack, October 7. Reuters reported that Sinwar's decision surprised and angered the Iranians, causing them to refrain from meeting his expectations and instruct Hezbollah to make do with a limited military operation against Israel starting October 8. The approach taken by Nasrallah, firing high-trajectory rockets and anti-tank missiles, was enough to hold down three Israeli divisions along the border and cause the evacuation of tens of thousands of civilians from border areas. However, Hezbollah took great care to avoid an all-out war.
- To a large extent, it was actually Israel that consistently raised the price it exacted from its northern adversary. This refers not only to the more than 300 fatalities Hezbollah and Palestinian organizations working with it sustained in Israeli airstrikes. Targets were gradually expanded to include senior commanders in Hezbollah's Radwan Force, in Iran's Revolutionary Guards and in Lebanon-based Hamas forces. The depth of targets chosen also increased. Damascus was a target before the war, with attacks aimed at Hezbollah's increasing acquisition of improved armaments. Last month, however, airstrikes included the Beqaa Valley east of Beirut and also targets north of it. Israel has not accepted responsibility for Monday's attack. The Israel Defense Forces spokesman released a short video showing Chief of Staff Herzl Halevi visiting Northern Command headquarters, with reports that he approved operations on that visit. In the attack, on a building next to Iran's embassy in Damascus, several other senior Iranians were also killed. According to reports, one of them was Mahadavi's deputy.

- **Another was his chief of staff. Iran has officially threatened a "sharp, direct and resolved" response to the assassination it attributes to Israel. The attack came following a night during which one of the Shi'ite militias in Iraq, funded by Iran, launched a drone at a naval base in Eilat. The drone was not intercepted and its explosion caused damage to a building on the base near where some naval vessels are anchored, including a Saar 6 missile boat. It's hard to know if the assassination was connected to Iran's indirect attack on Eilat, but it's obvious that there is a calculated message here: Iran is starting to pay a higher price for its involvement in attacks against Israel carried out through its proxies. It is not immune from counterattacks. Media outlets showed an old photo of senior Hezbollah and Revolutionary Guards members. Five people, including Mahdavi, are in the photo; of the five, only Nasrallah is still alive. Such a photo may enrage him, but one may hope that it will also make him more cautious.**
- **Although Hezbollah has launched thousands of missiles and antitank missiles against Israel since October 8, it has been quite careful about its choice of targets. It's fired precision antitank missiles at border communities and inaccurate ballistic missiles farther south, usually no farther than Safed. Until Monday night, no precision weapons have been launched deep into Israeli territory. The question is whether Nasrallah and his Iranian patrons will decide that it's time for a different message, and escalate their response. Such an act could shorten the path to war.**
- **Special attention should be paid to the American response to the latest developments – when it comes. US President Joe Biden has taken care to demonstrate direct support for Israel, after raising concern at the start of the war in Gaza that Iran and Hezbollah would join Hamas in full strength. His message was fully understood in Tehran and Beirut, but so too was its continuance, which senior administration officials made certain to send. They made it clear that Washington wouldn't respond blindly if Israel were to embark on a full-scale war in Lebanon. As far as Washington is concerned, the only solution that would enable residents of the Galilee to return to their homes is a diplomatic arrangement. It can be assumed that the Americans will now do their utmost to keep the situation in the north from deteriorating further, which is liable to directly complicate things with the Iranians. The United States hasn't demonstrated a particularly harsh response against Iran to date and has mainly sought compromise to delay the regime from developing an atomic bomb.**