



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and Middle East News Update

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Headlines:

- Israeli and Egyptian Officials Discuss Possible Rafah Invasion
- Hamas Issues Video Showing Israeli-American Hostage Goldberg-Polin
- Hamas Claims Holding More Live Hostages Than Israel Says
- Officials Acknowledge Failure of Campaign to Halt UNRWA Funding
- Ex-state Department Official Alleges IDF Gets 'Special Treatment'
- US Slams Smotrich's 'Reckless' Effort to Legalize West Bank Outposts
- Jamaica Follows Barbados in Recognizing Palestine as a State
- Gallant Says Group's South Lebanon Command Decimated

Commentary:

- **Ha'aretz: "How Long Can the Alliance Between Israel and Moderate Arab States Survive?"**
- By Ksenia Svetlova
- **Yedioth Ahronoth: "A Sign of Life from Hersh"**
- By Itamar Eichner

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News Excerpts

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Axios

Israeli and Egyptian Officials Discuss Rafah Invasion

Top Israeli intelligence and military officials met in Cairo with Egypt's intelligence chief and other key officials to discuss a possible Israel Defense Forces (IDF) operation in Rafah. Egyptian officials are concerned an Israeli operation in the southern Gaza city would lead to tens of thousands of displaced Palestinians entering their territory, potentially involving a breach of the border that would endanger Egypt's security. Senior Egyptian officials have said in public and closed talks with Israel that such a scenario would lead to a rupture in relations with Israel and could even jeopardize the peace agreement between the countries. Israeli officials said close military and diplomatic coordination with Egypt is one of the basic conditions for Israel's military action in Rafah, especially considering Israel's intention to take control of the Philadelphi corridor, which is adjacent to the border between the Gaza Strip and Egypt.

Reuters

Hamas Issues Video Showing Hostage Goldberg-Polin

The Islamist movement Hamas published a video apparently showing Hersh Goldberg-Polin, an Israeli-American seized during Hamas's Oct. 7 attack on Israel and taken into Gaza, alive. The short, undated video showed the 23-year-old missing a lower arm, but otherwise apparently healthy. He was shown saying he had sustained serious injuries during the attack "after I tried using my body as a shield to protect myself and other fearful civilians". His mother Rachel Goldberg-Polin has been campaigning for the release of her son, who was abducted at the Nova music festival and is one of 133 Israeli hostages still in captivity after more than 100 were released last year. His parents urged leaders involved in ceasefire negotiations to reach a deal.

Ynet News

Hamas Claims Holding More Live Hostages Than Israel Says

A senior Hamas official said the terror group was holding more live hostages than Israel anticipates. He was quoted in the Qatari-owned Al-Araby Al-Jadeed news outlet, on condition of anonymity. "Hamas is holding over 30 soldiers (officers, in his words) who were captured on October 7 and are being held and hidden from Israel in highly secure and remote locations. The only way to release them is through serious negotiations - followed by a full commitment for a cease-fire and reconstruction of the Strip." The official also claimed that Hamas leader in Gaza Yahya Sinwar was no longer hiding underground. "He recently emerged from the tunnels and met with the organization's fighters in the field, in areas where clashes with the IDF took place," he said. [Read More "Senior Hamas Official: We Offered to Release 40 Hostages in First Phase of Hostage Deal" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Officials Admit Failure of Campaign to Halt UNRWA Funding

Senior Israeli officials have admitted over the past day that the Israeli campaign against international funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) has failed. Several countries have announced over the past few weeks that they will renew the funding to UNRWA which they froze at the start of the Gaza war in the wake of Israeli claims that the organization was cooperating with Hamas and that some of its employees had actively participated in the October 7 attack. Germany, one of Israel's biggest international backers, said that it would restore funding to UNRWA, which it had frozen in January. A spokesperson for the German foreign ministry said in a statement that after examining Israel's claims Germany was convinced that supervision of UNRWA and its projects should be improved but that it would resume cooperation with the agency as several other countries have already done.

Associated Press

Ex Official Alleges IDF Gets 'Special Treatment' on Abuses

A former senior US official who until recently helped oversee human-rights compliance by foreign militaries receiving American military assistance said that he repeatedly observed Israel receiving "special treatment" from US officials when it came to scrutiny of allegations of Israeli military abuses of Palestinian civilians. The allegation comes as the Biden administration faces intense pressure over its ally's treatment of Palestinian civilians during Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza. And matters because of who said it: Charles O. Blaha. Before leaving the post in August, he was a director of a State Department security and human rights office closely involved in helping ensure that foreign militaries receiving American military aid follow US and international humanitarian and human rights laws. [Read More "Biden Signs Israel Defense Aid Bill, Says Delivery Imminent; Demands Israel Ensures Gaza Aid" \(Ha'aretz\)](#) ["US May Not Impose Sanctions on Netzah Yehuda Battalion" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Al-Monitor

US Slams Smotrich's Effort to Legalize West Bank Outposts

In the latest sign of friction between the Biden administration and the Israeli government, the State Department voiced concern over a report that Israel's far-right finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, is seeking to legalize dozens of outposts in the occupied West Bank. "These reports about directives to support illegal outposts in the occupied West Bank we believe to be dangerous and reckless," deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said. "The Israeli government's program is inconsistent with international law," Patel said, adding that the administration has urged Israeli officials to "refrain from taking actions to fund outposts that have long been illegal under Israeli law." Israel's Channel 12 reported that Smotrich, who is a member of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing coalition, is pushing to legalize 68 West Bank outposts. The report said Smotrich instructed several ministries to begin preparations for various public services, such as medical clinics and schools, in each of the outposts once they are legalized.

Jamaica Follows Barbados in Recognizing Palestine as a State

Jamaica followed its Caribbean neighbor Barbados in unilaterally recognizing the state of Palestine over the last week, giving the Palestinian Authority two diplomatic victories as it pushes for Western countries to take such a step. “Jamaica continues to advocate for a two-state solution as the only viable option to resolve the longstanding conflict, guarantee the security of Israel and uphold the dignity and rights of Palestinians,” Jamaican Foreign Minister Kamina Johnson Smith said in a statement her office issued. “The decision is aligned with Jamaica’s strong commitment to the principles of the UN Charter, which seeks to engender mutual respect and peaceful co-existence among states as well as the recognition of the rights of people of self-determination,” she said. Last week, the US vetoed a UN Security Council resolution which would have granted the Palestinians full UN membership, rather than its de facto acceptance as a non-member state. The Palestinians have held that status since 2012. Barbados Foreign Minister Kerrie Symmonds said that the country’s cabinet has “made the determination that the time is ripe for us to have a formal diplomatic recognition of the State of Palestine.” Both Jamaica and Barbados have a diplomatic relationship with Israel that dates back to the 1960s.

Gallant Says Group’s South Lebanon Command Decimated

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant claimed that the military had killed half of Hezbollah’s commanders in southern Lebanon, as the IDF carried out a large wave of strikes against dozens of sites belonging to the terror group. “Half of the Hezbollah commanders in south Lebanon have been eliminated... and the other half hide and abandon south Lebanon to IDF operations,” Gallant said, after holding an assessment at the Northern Command headquarters in Safed with the chief of the command, Maj. Gen. Ori Gordin, and other top officers. He said Israel’s main goal in the north was to return tens of thousands of Israelis displaced by Hezbollah’s daily attacks to their homes. “We are dealing with a number of alternatives in order to establish this matter, and the coming period will be decisive in this regard,” Gallant said. As the defense minister toured the Northern Command, the IDF said some 40 Hezbollah targets in the town of Ayta ash-Shab were hit within just several minutes by fighter jets and artillery shelling. [Read More “Yemen’s Houthis Say They Targeted American and Israeli Ships” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

How Long Can the Alliance Between Israel and Moderate Arab States Survive?

By Ksenia Svetlova

- The ties between Israel and its Arab partners in the Middle East have proven to be much more resilient than many suspected. If Hamas' Yahya Sinwar's and his Iranian backers' vision in the wake of the October 7 events was to disrupt them, the consolidated counter-attack against Iran has exposed its fallacy. Yet, the threat to these ties still exists. Their potential, and very survival, is dependent on the war coming to an end and Israelis and Palestinians working – within a regional supportive framework – towards a political horizon that includes an independent Palestinian state. Not only the US, but also Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and other Middle Eastern countries participated alongside Israel in fending off Iranian drone and missile attacks on the night of April 13.
- It was an historic night in every way. It was the first time ever Iran attacked Israel directly, and it was the first time that the regional alliance between Israel and the moderate Arab states was on full display during wartime. Every whisper and rumor, every evidence of growing cooperation between Israel and these states in the sphere of defense and intelligence, every overt and covert diplomatic attempt to promote further cooperation, came together in a complete picture. It made very clear: Israel and the moderate block of Arab countries in the region have common enemies and are ready to work together to brush off the danger. Yet, there is also a fly in the ointment. A big one.
- While the regimes in these countries fully participated in this multinational military effort against the Iranian attack, their many critics and enemies, both from within and outside, went out of their way to attack this decision, smear the leadership, and blame it for cooperation with Israel. Many citizens of these countries might dislike Iran, but today, in the midst of the war in Gaza, they cheered its attack against Israel, just as they cheered Saddam Hussein when he attacked Tel Aviv with SCUD missiles back in 1991. There is little doubt that Israel can only benefit from growing regional alliances that have proven resilient despite the enormous pressure created by the tragic events of October 7 and the war in Gaza. Not a single Arab government closed its embassy or severed ties. Most didn't recall ambassadors, believing that having seasoned diplomats in Tel Aviv is quite an asset in these troubled times. Airplanes continue to fly to Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and Israeli gas still flows to Cairo. Commercial cooperation between Israel and Jordan, Egypt, Bahrain, the UAE, Morocco, and other countries has continued.
- However, the pressure on the respective Arab governments is growing. If anyone needs proof, they are welcome to take a stroll in the streets of Amman, where weekly demonstrations in support of Gaza and against Israel take place. Public opinion polls as well as regional consumer boycotts that primarily hurt American food chains and retail shops, also indicate the level of engagement and tension. Israeli leadership often dismisses these public sentiments, emphasizing the ongoing cooperation, mostly in the military field.

- **This is how ties developed between Egypt and Israel at the time – common interests dictated the necessity for a peace agreement and some cooperation in defense. However, Egypt, which never sought just a narrow, bilateral peace with Israel and aimed for a wider coalition of Arab states to engage in this process while working on a solution for Palestinians, never grew closer to Israel. Bilateral ties remain limited, and a much hoped for "warm" peace never arrived. With the Abraham Accords, Israeli leadership hoped not to repeat the path of its relations with Egypt and Jordan but still hoped it could leave the Palestinian question behind, similar to what happened at Camp David.**
- **The war in Gaza exposed the faults in this approach. It became clear that Israel cannot truly promote its relations with Arab neighbors, expand existing ties, and sign new treaties without a long-term solution to the Palestinian question that leads to an independent Palestinian state. And there is little hope of making progress with the Palestinians without the support and involvement of Arab countries. Only full-scale regional integration – through linked transportation, business and job opportunities, access to markets, common efforts in agriculture, joint climate change action, a focus on youth unemployment, culture, and more – can provide security and stability to both sides that will need to agree to difficult compromises and deals. Only by working together on regional security and prosperity will it be possible to weaken spoilers such as Hamas, the Israeli extreme right, and Iran, and remain on track.**
- **Furthermore, the fundamental Israeli understanding of the real meaning of regional alliances must change, moving away from the concept of Israel as a "villa in the jungle" and finally, almost 76 years after statehood, towards real bridges of communication and cooperation. So far, Israel hasn't tried to use its assets – its Arab citizens, as well as its vast community of Mizrahi Jews whose roots lie in the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, or Iraq – although that seems like a natural step towards finding a common language with its neighbors. Israel has much to gain from regional alliances and much to lose if they are disrupted or weakened. It's time for a united and integrated Middle East that both Israelis and Palestinians, citizens of sovereign, secure, and prosperous countries, can call home.**

A Sign of Life from Hersh

By Itamar Eichner

- **The Hostage and Missing Families Forum issued the following statement: “Hersh’s cry is the cry of all the hostages—their time is up. The State of Israel doesn’t have any more time to waste. The hostages need to be put at the top [of Israel’s priorities]. Without them, the State of Israel will never recover and have victory. All of them need to be brought home—the living for rehabilitation, the murdered for a dignified burial.” After the video was released, hundreds of protesters set off firecrackers and lit bonfires on Azza Street in Jerusalem, outside Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s home. The police clashed with the protesters and arrested two for allegedly setting fires and disorderly conduct.**
- **The demonstration was joined by fans of the Hapoel Jerusalem Football Club, and the so-called Brigada Fan Club was involved in organizing the demonstration. Hersh is a Hapoel Jerusalem fan too. Some of the protesters arrived in the area of the demonstration wearing masks. A photo of Hersh was posted by Hapoel Jerusalem on X with the following text: “There isn’t any time to waste. Now!” Meanwhile, hundreds of other protesters gathered outside a building in which National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir was holding a meeting and called on him to come out. The minister, who insisted on leaving through the front door with a police escort and not taking a backdoor out, came out smiling and waved—while all around him police officers clashed with the protesters.**
- **The security cabinet is scheduled to meet today after 12 days in which it was not convened. The war cabinet will meet before the security cabinet meeting for the second time this week after it met on Sunday. The war cabinet ministers will discuss ways of jumpstarting negotiations over a hostage deal despite the difficulties that have been encountered and the ongoing war in Gaza. The prevailing assessment is that an operation in Rafah, which is one of the issues that will be discussed by the security cabinet, will help to ramp up pressure on Hamas and will improve the chances of a deal. Several new and creative ideas for ending the impasse in the negotiations were presented this week.**
- **Israeli officials have come to believe that Egypt needs to play a more prominent role in the negotiations than Qatar, given Israel’s disappointment with the role that Qatar has played—it’s insistence on Hamas’s survival, its failure to use the necessary levers of pressure, such as threatening to expel Hamas’s leadership and to shut down bank accounts. An Israeli official said that Hamas is the obstacle to a hostage deal. He said, “The United States has also said that. Blinken said that himself. To come and blame Israel is absurd. Israel is prepared to do everything, including to release prisoners with blood on their hands and to allow a population to return to the northern Gaza Strip. But we mustn’t forget that this is a brutal terrorist organization. Every request that was made to Israel was met with acceptance, but there’s a limit. Hamas is simply not being serious. They don’t want to let go of their most important card—the hostages.” That is the prism through which Israeli officials view the video that was released.**

- **One Israeli political official said, “Its purpose is to create domestic pressure in Israel. The messages in the video are directed at Netanyahu and the government. Hamas’s strategy is to sow internal chaos and, if possible, to bring about the government’s dissolution.” National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said that President Biden had met with Abigail Idan, a four-year-old girl who was kidnapped to the Gaza Strip on October 7 after both her parents were murdered, and was freed in the hostage deal. Abigail is an American citizen, and President Biden repeatedly spoke about her publicly while she was in captivity.**