



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

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Ynet News

Israel Hopes Egyptian Proposal Will Lead to a Breakthrough

Israel's war Cabinet convened to deliberate on additional pathways for a potential deal with Hamas. Under the first clause of the Egyptian plan, Israel will commit to halting all preparations for the Rafah operation. The Egyptian intelligence chief clarified that not only Egypt but also the United States and the European Union fear for the fate of the civilian population in the event of an Israeli incursion into southern Gaza. The second clause is the release of all Israeli hostages in two stages, over a 10-week period. It is important to note that Egypt did not specify the number of Israeli hostages but clarified that this is the release of "all hostages" in exchange for the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners. The third clause is a full cease-fire for a year, during which Israel and Hamas commit not to fire or use weapons on land and in the air. The declaration of the cease-fire will mark the beginning of steps toward the establishment of a Palestinian state. The "patrons" of this declaration will be the US, Egypt, Jordan and the PA.

I24 News

New "Freedom Flotilla" Prepares to Depart for Gaza

The Marmara 2 flotilla is gearing up for departure from Turkey early next week, with a diverse group of passengers including intellectuals, former politicians, and descendants of renowned revolutionary figures such as Che Guevara and Nelson Mandela. Set to sail towards the Gaza Strip, the "Freedom Flotilla" aims to raise awareness about the humanitarian situation in Gaza, carrying approximately 5,500 tonnes of aid. The departure of the Marmara 2, comprising three ships currently docked in Turkish ports, has faced several postponements. While the exact route remains under discussion, the plan is for the ships to head to Al-Arish in Egypt, where the aid will be unloaded and transferred into Gaza under controlled conditions. In light of the fraught history between Israel and Turkey, efforts are underway to avoid a repeat of the fiasco experienced 14 years ago with the previous [Mavi Marmara flotilla](#) in 2010.

Reuters

Israel Intensifies Strikes on Rafah Ahead of Invasion

Israel stepped up airstrikes on Rafah overnight after saying it would evacuate civilians from the southern Gazan city and launch an all-out assault despite allies' warnings this could cause mass casualties. Medics in the besieged Palestinian enclave reported five Israeli airstrikes on Rafah that hit at least three houses, killing at least six people including a local journalist. "We are afraid of what will happen in Rafah. The level of alert is very high," Ibrahim Khraishi, the Palestinian ambassador to the United Nations. The Gaza Strip is about 25 miles long and between about 3 miles and 7.5 miles wide and is one of the most densely populated areas in the world.

Poll: Americans Have Little or No Confidence in Netanyahu

A slight majority of Americans 53% have little or no confidence in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to do the right thing regarding world affairs, including 25% who have no confidence in him at all, according to a Pew Research Center survey. This compared to 21% of Americans who said they have some confidence in Netanyahu and 9% of Americans who said they had a lot of confidence. 15% of respondents said they had never heard of him. The share of Americans who have no confidence in Netanyahu has increased 11% points since 2023, including an 8-point increase in the share who have no confidence in him at all. In 2023, 26% of Americans said they had never heard of Netanyahu. 51% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents have much more positive views of Netanyahu than Democrats and Democratic leaners 13% do. Older Americans are significantly more likely than younger ones to have positive views of Netanyahu, the survey says.

US Artificial Island for Gaza Aid to Be Running in Early May

The US's artificial island is expected to be completed and operating by early May, according to IDF sources. The artificial island, or Joint Logistics Over the Shore (JLOTS) pier, has been in the works since it was announced by US President Joe Biden in his State of the Union address on March 7. At the time, the announcement caught many Israeli officials by surprise and it was the start of a series of moves of Washington injecting itself more forcefully into the humanitarian situation in Gaza. The IDF provided the following statement regarding security over the construction and operation of the island: "The IDF, through the coordination of COGAT, has approved collaborative efforts for the new JLOTS initiative led by the CENTCOM". The initiative will create an enhanced ship-to-shore distribution system to increase the flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza. Senior US officials confirmed that Israel would dedicate a brigade to protecting US forces.

Smotrich Threatens to Topple PA if US Takes Unilateral Steps

Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich sent a message to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with a public letter, in which he warned that steps would be taken against the PA in response to its actions on the diplomatic front. In his letter issued, Smotrich wrote: "As is known, in recent years, the Palestinian Authority has been promoting a series of unilateral moves against Israel in international bodies, such as the International Criminal Court, the International Court of Justice, the Security Council, and the United Nations General Assembly. A year ago, I requested a strategic discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of the existence of the PA, and to examine our relations. I argued that, given the dangerous strategic implications of the legal proceedings conducted by the PA against Israel, the damage outweighs the tactical benefits we derive from our security coordination with it and its covert operations."

US Sanctions Iranian Company Supplying Suicide Drones to Russia

The US has imposed sanctions on Sahara Thunder, an Iranian front company that provides cover for the Iranian Defense Ministry's commercial activities, the US Treasury Department announced. The Iranian firm is responsible in part for providing Shahed 136 suicide drones to the Russian army and for providing extensive assistance in setting up infrastructure for the manufacture of the drones in Yelabuga in the Russian Republic of Tatarstan. The Treasury Department statement said that Britain and Canada were also imposing sanctions on several entities and individuals involved in Iranian infrastructure involving the trade in drones, also known as UAVs, as well as other military activity. The statement said that the additions to the American sanctions list included more than a dozen "entities, individuals, and vessels that have played a central role in facilitating and financing the clandestine sale of Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles for Iran's Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics, which itself is involved in supporting Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Russia's war in Ukraine." [Read More "Interpol Issues Warrant Against Iranian Minister for Involvement in Argentina Attack" \(Ha'aretz\)](#) ["UK Slaps Fresh Sanctions on Iran After Israel Attack" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Hezbollah Denies Israel's Claim to Have Killed Half of Its Commanders

Hezbollah denied Defense Minister Yoav Gallant's claim that Israeli forces have killed half of the Iran-backed terror group's commanders in southern Lebanon, saying only a handful were slain. Gallant said that "half of Hezbollah's commanders in southern Lebanon have been eliminated" in the months of cross-border violence sparked by the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. "The other half are in hiding and abandoning the field to IDF operations," he added, without specifying numbers. A Hezbollah source who spoke on condition of anonymity with AFP rejected the claim, saying the number of slain Hezbollah members who "hold a certain level of responsibility does not exceed the number of fingers on one hand." The source argued that Gallant's claim was "untrue and baseless" and designed to "raise the morale of the collapsed [Israeli] army." Israel has frequently reported killing local Hezbollah commanders in targeted strikes amid the months of fighting, but the group has only confirmed a few were high-level members, referring to the rest as fighters in statements. [Read More "IDF Detects Two Anti-Tank Missiles Fired at North Israel From Lebanon" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

A Shameless Minister

By Oded Shalom

- In the competition for the worst minister in this disastrous government, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich has been putting up a real fight against the man who has held the lead so far, Otzma Yehudit Chairman Itamar Ben Gvir, the minister for ravaging national security. It really is a tough competition since Ben Gvir has already ravaged the Israel Police and the Prisons Service, and has appointed sycophants in them to enact racist policies that ignore all suffering by Arabs as such. Smotrich's response to IDF Intelligence Director Maj. Gen. Aharon Haliva's resignation was a performance that showcased shirking responsibility. A finance minister on whose watch the state coffers were robbed for political needs and who didn't lift a finger to lower the deficit, and by so doing led to a downgrade in Israel's credit rating—this is the same a finance minister who now has the gall to rebuke others for failing to take responsibility? He took to tweeting, as if that was what we needed. “More ‘responsibility’ like this and we're done for,” he wrote in response to the letter of resignation that was tendered by the director of military intelligence. “I wanted to praise Maj. Gen. Haliva, but then I read the letter he sent to the chief of staff. A sea of lofty words, zero assumption of responsibility. No admission of mistake, recognition of failure and the reasons for it.”
- Look who's talking. The man who is responsible for the public coffers that have been looted in mid-war for the purposes of political survival; a man who serves in the government on whose watch the worst disaster in the country's history happened—he of all people has the gall to talk about responsibility. Now he's suddenly become a textual critic too. How lucky we are that he didn't submit a meticulously-argued piece to the literary supplement. What about the prime minister who hasn't taken responsibility, a man who has been incapable of admitting with even half a word, a nod of his head—something, anything—that he too bears responsibility, that he too shoulders responsibility for the catastrophe? Instead, Smotrich has issues with the outgoing military intelligence director's remarks about a state commission of inquiry that will be tasked with investigating all parties responsible for the October 7 debacle. “I don't know whether a state commission of inquiry should be formed...” wrote one of the top officials responsible for the debacle [Smotrich]. “I do know that that isn't within the purview of an IDF officer in uniform.” That shameless man has zero humility. At the very least, he ought to hold his tongue.
- He hasn't only ravaged our economy. He has also been hard at work on the settlement front as well. In his capacity as the minister in the Defense Ministry who is responsible for settlement affairs in Judea and Samaria, he has enacted a policy designed to legalize several dozen settlement outposts that were established illegally. The administration that he established within the Defense Ministry has assiduously applied itself to whitewashing criminal acts. Barely any information about that has made its way to the general public since most of the public's attention has been turned towards the hostages, the fighting in Gaza and along the northern border.

- **But an ever-increasing number of settlement outposts have been whitewashed by the bye, and all of us will find ourselves stuck with the bill. Those settlements have been whitewashed without an orderly cabinet resolution and without any strategic thought about their significance and repercussions. This is an act that is in violation of international law and which contradicts the Americans' national interests. I'm not the one who says so; it is written, black on white, in the special presidential order that allows sanctions to be imposed against anyone who acts against the two-state solution, which the American administration defines as one of its "national security interests." This is a government that has lost all sense of shame. It is irresponsible and nothing bad that happens ever has any connection to it. Only one or two of its ministers even bother to try to act like a human being, while all the others are in stiff competition with one another over who can cause more damage and destruction. It's no wonder, therefore, that Smotrich has not only dodged his own responsibility but has gone on to publicly cast aspersions on others who have taken responsibility. I would write that he ought to be ashamed of himself, but there is zero chance of that ever happening.**

The Transfer Stage

By Nahum Barnea

- **After weeks of treading water, things are beginning to change on the Gaza front, and they require attention. Local contractors have been doing groundwork in the area between Khan Yunis and Rafah, from the Mediterranean coast to the east, for four tent cities. The funding has been provided by international aid organizations. Israel has laid a water pipe. In a certain sense. The dream of rebuilding Gush Katif, a dream that was rekindled early in the war, is now coming true before our very eyes: from the beautiful, palm-filled beaches in Al-Mawasi, from the [area of the former] Neve Dekalim Hotel, via Gan Or, Bedolah, Morag and Atzmona, and possibly also via Neve Dekalim and Gani Tal. Gush Katif is returning to life. That is the plan.**
- **Military officials said they expected that the population transfer will take between ten and 20 days to complete. Prior to the transfer, medical facilities will be expanded; the existing hospitals will be expanded, and new hospitals will be built alongside them. American CENTCOM troops on board ships will build a long pier at sea that leads to the Netzarim Corridor. The pier is designed to allow ships to dock. It will be built alongside the smaller pier that the Palestinians built there. The IDF will secure the construction work. Dismantling the three remaining Hamas battalions that are stationed in Rafah will take another month and a half to complete. Hamas will disappear as a military force but will continue to exist as a terrorist force and a governmental force.**
- **The local contractors are only contractors. For the time being, Israel has refused to allow for a Palestinian administration to become established. There is no guarantee that Sinwar will either be killed or caught, or whether he will flee into the Sinai Peninsula. He might continue to operate from within his network of tunnels between Khan Yunis and Rafah. Beneath the noise of the bulldozers at work, Netanyahu and military officials have been playing a game of ping pong. The politicians say they would have ordered an invasion of Rafah long ago, but the IDF regrettably wasn't ready. IDF officials say that the military has been ready for a long time, and the politicians haven't given the orders yet. All that is part of the parties' way of coping with their responsibility for the war and its difficulties. The truth is that the decisions that need to be made now aren't military in nature. They are political and diplomatic.**
- **Everything is intertwined: the fate of the hostages, an incursion into Rafah, relations with the United States and Israel's standing in the region. IDF Chief of Staff Halevi and GSS Director Bar visited Cairo on Wednesday. The chief of staff was there to discuss Rafah, and the GSS director was there to discuss the hostages. The Egyptians have a key role to play in any military operation that is carried out near their border. They are also the more important mediator in the negotiations with Hamas, mainly now that Qatar has sought to take a step back. No real progress was made on either issue, but an Egyptian delegation has come to Israel for continued work. There may not be any optimism, but there is a crack. The Israeli public was inundated over the course of two weeks with statements asserting that Hamas doesn't want any deal of any kind. That wasn't true.**

- **Hamas does want a deal, just one on its difficult terms. The video that was released on Wednesday, in which the hostage Hersh Goldberg-Polin spoke, points to Sinwar's real wishes. Now, notwithstanding all the bluster, Israel is prepared to return to the negotiating table. The issue currently being discussed is a humanitarian release only, a deal that will release roughly 20 Israelis—female soldiers as well as elderly and ailing hostages. If a deal is concluded, a pause in fighting will ensue and the IDF will not enter Rafah. There are three options, said to me a well-informed source: A deal instead of Rafah, Rafah instead of a deal, or more treading water, without a deal and without Rafah.**
- **The third option would be the worst of all. One of the factors motivating the IDF to support a hostage deal is the situation along the Lebanese border. A deal in Gaza will facilitate an agreement in the north and will allow the residents to return home. That is an issue of real concern for the IDF. Surprisingly enough, it doesn't appear to concern the government. No ministers have visited, and no meetings on the issue have been held. Once every few days, Gallant heads north to Safed, makes a threatening statement, and returns.**
- **The second and very important player in the talks about Rafah and the hostages is the American administration. Biden would be pleased to hear that Israel has dismantled the three Hamas battalions, but the fate of the civilian population in Rafah—the displaced Palestinians from the northern Gaza Strip as well as the 400,000 local residents—is his greater concern. New images of destruction and death in Rafah will poison his chances of reelection. Summer Lee is an African-American Congresswoman from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She belongs to the anti-Israel faction in the Democratic Party. She ran this week in the local primary election. Jeff Yass, a former major donor to the Kohelet Forum, invested 600,000 dollars to defeat her. She nevertheless won the election easily, using the Jewish billionaire's donations as her campaign slogan. Hatred for Israel isn't restricted to the campuses.**