



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and Middle East News Update

Friday, May 3

Headlines:

- **Hamas Returns to Egypt, Israel Cabinet Convenes**
- **Cabinet Set to Approve Decision to Close Al Jazeera in Israel**
- **Sinwar Continues Demand of Unconditional End to War**
- **US: Hamas Seized Aid Shipment That Entered Gaza via Erez**
- **Prominent Gaza Doctor Dies in Israeli Prison**
- **Senators Meet with ICC over Possible Israel Arrest Warrants**
- **US and Saudi Arabia Nearing Agreement on Security Pact**
- **Turkey Halts All Trade with Israel over Military Actions in Gaza**

Commentary:

- **Ha'aretz: "Israelis Must Flood the Streets to Keep the IDF Out of Rafah"**
- By Ehud Olmert
- **Yedioth Ahronoth: "When Netanyahu Lost the Security Cabinet"**
- By Nahum Barnea

S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace
1725 I St NW Suite 300, Washington, DC 20006
The Hon. Robert Wexler, President

News Excerpts

May 3, 2024

Al-Monitor

Hamas Returns to Egypt, Israel Cabinet Convenes

Israel's war cabinet is currently discussing the hostage-release proposal while waiting for Hamas to deliver its response. The larger security cabinet is set to meet after the war cabinet meeting ends as Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh told Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry over the phone that a delegation will arrive in Cairo to further discuss the proposal. Hamas representatives received the current Egyptian-mediated offer last Monday, but Israel now estimates that a response might arrive today or even later. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu admitted that the war cabinet is divided over a possible military operation in Rafah. Reports in the Israeli press have indicated that war cabinet ministers Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot are pushing for a deal to be reached, even if the cost would be delaying the Rafah operation for a long period. In contrast, Netanyahu said that Israel should go into Rafah "deal or no deal."

Jerusalem Post

Cabinet Set to Approve Decision to Close Al Jazeera in Israel

The Jerusalem Post has learned that the cabinet is set to approve Prime Minister Netanyahu's and Communications Minister Shlomo Karhi's decision to close the Al Jazeera station in Israel. The Association for Civil Rights in Israel argued in a deposition to the Supreme Court that the government intentionally requested a delay in a court hearing to avoid judicial oversight and to implement immediately a law to shut down the Qatari news network. On April 1, the Knesset passed a law aimed at enabling the government to shut down Al Jazeera. Prime Minister Netanyahu said that day that he would act to implement the law "immediately." On April 4, ACRI appealed to the Supreme Court against the law, arguing that it unnecessarily limited free speech and was thus unconstitutional. The government was given until May 1 to respond, but on April 26 it requested a two-week delay, which was granted on May 1.

I24 News

Sinwar Continues Demand of Unconditional End to War

As diplomatic efforts intensify to broker a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, the leader of the Gaza-based militant group, Yahya Sinwar, has outlined key demands that must be addressed before an agreement can be reached. According to reports from Channel 12 news, Sinwar's demands are being discussed by Egyptian mediators with the assistance of the United States. Sinwar is insisting on a guaranteed and unconditional end to the ongoing conflict. his demand, a consistent priority for Hamas, seeks to amend the proposed clause that calls for negotiations on a sustainable calm to begin after an initial 40-day truce phase. Instead, Sinwar is pushing for a written commitment ensuring an immediate cessation of hostilities, without any conditions attached. [Read More "Former US Official: Hamas Leader Surrounded by Hostages" \(I24 News\)](#)

Times of Israel

US: Hamas Seized Aid Shipment That Entered Gaza via Erez

Hamas managed to seize a major shipment of humanitarian aid that was delivered to Gaza from Jordan earlier this week, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said, after the supplies were the first to be shipped to the enclave through a newly reopened Israeli border crossing. Secretary of State Antony Blinken viewed the aid on Tuesday just before it departed from the headquarters of the Jordan Hashemite Charity Organization in Amman bound for the renovated crossing into the Gaza Strip at Erez, which was largely destroyed by Hamas during its October 7 terror onslaught that sparked the ongoing war. The reopening of Erez, Israel's sole crossing on the northern edge of Gaza, had been a main plea of international aid agencies for months, to alleviate the humanitarian situation which is believed to be most severe among the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in the north of the enclave.

Reuters

Prominent Gaza Doctor Dies in Israeli Prison

A senior Palestinian doctor died in an Israeli prison after more than four months of detention, two Palestinian prisoner associations said, blaming Israel for his death. The associations said in a joint statement that Adnan Al-Bursh, head of orthopedics at Al Shifa Hospital, Gaza's largest medical facility, had been detained by Israeli forces while temporarily working at Al-Awada Hospital in north Gaza. They called his death an "assassination" and said his body remained in Israeli custody. An Israeli military spokesperson said that the prison service had declared Bursh dead on April 19, saying that he had been detained for national security reasons in Ofer prison. The spokesperson did not comment on the cause of death. Medical groups, including the World Health Organization, have repeatedly called for a halt to attacks on Gaza healthcare workers, with more than 200 killed so far in the Gaza conflict, according to an estimate from Insecurity Insight, a research group that collects and analyses data on attacks on aid workers around the world.

Axios

Senators Meet with ICC over Possible Israel Arrest Warrants

A bipartisan group of US senators held a virtual meeting with senior officials at the International Criminal Court (ICC) to express their concern about possible arrest warrants being issued for Israeli leaders over the war in Gaza, according to three sources who were in the meeting or briefed about it. Israeli officials have grown increasingly worried over the last two weeks that the ICC is preparing to issue arrest warrants for Prime Minister Netanyahu, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi. Republican lawmakers threatened to pass legislation against the ICC if it moves forward with the arrest warrants, which the Biden administration has said it opposes. Israeli officials said Netanyahu, who is extremely nervous about the possible arrest warrants, spoke to several Republican and Democratic senators in recent days and asked them to press the ICC prosecutor not to move forward with issuing arrest warrants.

Reuters

US and Saudi Arabia Nearing Agreement on Security Pact

The Biden administration and Saudi Arabia are finalizing an agreement for US security guarantees and civilian nuclear assistance, even as an Israel-Saudi normalization deal envisioned as part of a Middle East “grand bargain” remains elusive, according to seven people familiar with the matter. A working draft lays out principles and proposals aimed at putting back on track a US-led effort to reshape the volatile region that was derailed by Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack on Israel and the outbreak of war in Gaza. It appears to be a long-shot strategy that faces numerous obstacles, not least the uncertainty over how the Gaza conflict will unfold. US and Saudi negotiators have, for now, prioritized a bilateral security accord that would then be part of a wider package presented to Prime Minister Netanyahu, who would have to decide whether to make concessions to secure historic ties with Riyadh, five of the sources said. That part of the plan is likely to call for formal US guarantees to defend the kingdom as well as Saudi access to more advanced US weaponry in return for halting Chinese arms purchases and restricting Beijing’s investment in the country, according to foreign diplomats in the Gulf and sources in Washington. The US-Saudi security accord is also expected to involve sharing emerging technologies with Riyadh, including artificial intelligence, according to people familiar with the matter. The terms are expected to be finalized within weeks, a US official said on condition of anonymity.

Associated Press

Turkey Halts All Trade with Israel over Military Actions in Gaza

Turkey suspended all imports and exports to Israel citing the country’s ongoing military action in Gaza and vowed to continue to impose the measures until the Israeli government allows the flow of humanitarian aid to the region. Turkish officials would coordinate with Palestinian authorities to ensure that Palestinians are not affected by the suspension of imports and exports, the ministry said. The ministry described the step as the “second phase” of measures against Israel, adding that the steps would remain in force until Israel “allows an uninterrupted and sufficient flow of humanitarian aid to Gaza.” Last month, Turkey — a staunch critic of Israel’s military actions — announced that it was restricting exports of 54 types of products to Israel, including aluminum, steel, construction products and chemical fertilizers. Israel responded by also announcing trade barriers. Erdogan’s government, which suffered major setbacks in local elections in March, is faced with intense pressure at home to halt trade with Israel. Critics accuse the government of engaging in double standards by leveling strong accusations against Israel while pressing ahead with commercial relations. Turkey recognized Israel in 1949. Under Erdogan, tensions have ebbed and flowed between the countries. The Turkish leader stepped up his criticism of Israel following its military offensive in Gaza, accusing it of carrying out war crimes and genocide. He has described Hamas, considered a terrorist organization by Israel, the US and the European Union, as freedom fighters.

Israelis Must Flood the Streets to Keep the IDF Out of Rafah

By Ehud Olmert

- **After more than six months of hybrid warfare – in the air, on land and underground – it's possible to conclude that the bulk of Hamas' military power has been dismantled. Most of its rockets and launch sites have been destroyed and there has hardly been any rocket fire from the Gaza Strip for over four months. This isn't the result of some tactical decision by Hamas intended to deceive and disarm Israeli security forces, to then surprise us again with an unexpected attack that could gravely damage the home front and our combat units. It is highly likely that Hamas has hardly any rockets or launch sites left and is incapable of operating the few it has, as the military controls most of the areas from which rockets could be fired at Israel.**
- **A considerable portion of Hamas fighters has been killed, an accomplishment that is highly significant. These are not just its frontline combatants, but also members of its command level. It is almost certain that the most senior commanders, above all Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Deif, are still alive. They are hiding in places whose penetration could exact a heavy price from Israel, one that would be wrong to pay. It will be possible to hit Sinwar and Deif in future targeted actions, even if it takes time and does not necessarily suit the prime minister's personal timetable. For him, the killing of Hamas commanders is an opportunity to throw a victory gala designed to obscure the magnitude of the failure for which he bears responsibility – the October 7 disaster.**
- **However, as has been said repeatedly, the course of the war and its priorities must not be made subordinate to Netanyahu's personal needs. There is no one in Israel who isn't yearning to hear of Deif and Sinwar being killed. They are cold-blooded arch-murderers who lack moral inhibitions, terrorists in the fullest sense of the term. As much as we want to take them out, we must act with restraint, patience and reason. During the Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah was defined as a target for a strike. We wanted to chop off the head of that poisonous snake, but we did not make the war subservient to this cause alone. Ultimately, Nasrallah stated on Lebanese television that had he known what 1 percent of the scope of Israel's response to the abduction and murder of Ehud Goldwasser, Eldad Regev and other soldiers would be, and Israel's ferocious response to Hezbollah's rocket attack, he wouldn't have done it.**
- **As an Israeli military accomplishment, such a statement from a live Nasrallah was almost the same as killing him and displaying his body. The 17 years in which he took caution not to initiate a single attack on Israel – not even with light arms – are a profound reflection of the military accomplishment of that 2006 war and the deterrence it created on the northern border. Even though some among us still enjoy criticizing its successes after all these years, the fact that Nasrallah understands the magnitude of his defeat is enough to put that war in the right perspective. At this point, we have achieved the same level of deterrence in Gaza that we had at the end of the Second Lebanon War. At the beginning of the ground maneuver in Gaza, the prime minister set an unrealistic goal, which there was no way to achieve and no way to measure.**

- Benjamin Netanyahu did it, to my understanding, for vile conspiratorial reasons that can't be concealed. He knew talk of "total victory" over Hamas was an empty slogan. There will not be such a victory. In its absence, he can always blame the military for not accomplishing it. In reality, we have seen a genuine, impressive and unprecedented victory. Never has a conventional military been forced to fight a terror organization that hides almost entirely inside a network of underground tunnels dozens of meters deep, located in dense urban centers housing hundreds of thousands of uninvolved civilians. These civilians were, against their will, placed at the center of Israel's military activity and, unavoidably, became exposed to airstrikes and fire from commando units chasing terrorist leaders, becoming tragic victims of the war.
- In this complex entanglement, and under the international community's critical eyes – including those of our staunchest friends and supporters – the Israel Defense Forces has performed admirably. There is no military campaign this complicated that is conducted without mistakes, without unnecessary friendly fire and shooting toward uninvolved civilians. There have been some troubling displays of trigger-happiness, whose victims included some of our hostages as well as Gazan civilians who were caught in combat zones and paid with their lives. Few could deny that in several cases, our soldiers were unnecessarily reckless. But it is hard to blame them, considering the highly unique nature of this combat, which takes place in the total confusion of fighting inside residential neighborhoods and above Hamas death tunnel shafts.
- However, there is one goal we have not achieved yet – releasing the hostages. This goal was not at the center of Netanyahu's attention from the start, and he has apparently thwarted several opportunities to expand understandings brokered between Israel and Hamas and proceed to a comprehensive deal that would release all the hostages. Rafah is not a crucial objective that would decide the outcome of the fighting between Israel and Hamas.
- Although it's emotionally difficult, almost impossible to accept, it's important to understand that Israel will not emerge victorious from this confrontation. The boastful talk of "total victory" reflects stupidity, arrogance and, above all, an effort to create distance from an image of non-victory and evade the inevitable public judgment that will likely follow. Netanyahu long ago stopped thinking about what is best for Israel, its future and its strategic interests. It's been a long time since he's considered the inevitable obligation to start limiting the damage of the harsh blow we have suffered and laying the foundations for restoring the country, the military, the security forces and, most of all, Israeli society, whose solidarity was once the secret of its strength.
- Netanyahu lives in a bubble that is cut off from reality. Inside the bubble, he tells himself and the others inside that he is fighting for Israel's existence, that an immediate risk is threatening it and that his historic mission is to face off against the entire world and defend Israel from those who want to destroy it. Netanyahu's behavior leaves no other conclusion than that in his view, many of his opponents knowingly and deliberately seek Israel's destruction.

- I presume that those staying in the emotionally impervious human tunnel in which he is trapped (along with his family and a few supporters) believe most of Israel's friends in the world, chiefly US President Joe Biden and perhaps a few European leaders, could cause Israel's destruction because of pressure from leftists and Israel-haters from within and their allies elsewhere. In this respect, it seems that in Netanyahu's worldview, the country's biggest enemies are the most fearless and daring of Israel's soldiers and members of the elected opposition in the Knesset. I include Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, whose decency and devotion to Israel is being exploited by Netanyahu, while deep down, he unquestionably despises them and sees them as both enemies and rivals. We have reached the decisive stage: Are we heading for a hostage rescue deal or hurtling at an insane speed toward a crash in the outskirts of Rafah?
- Taking Rafah has no strategic significance as far as Israel's vital interests are concerned. Netanyahu understands this, as do some senior military officers and retired officers. Destroying four additional Hamas battalions might have been the correct move had it been disconnected from the wider context of events. But such a maneuver would take months and involve many fatalities among our soldiers, kill thousands of uninvolved Palestinians and crush what remains of Israel's international reputation. It would intensify demonstrations on every campus in America and around the world and lead to arrest warrants being issued against Israeli leaders and combat soldiers. Most of all, it would put the hostages in immediate danger. Such a move would constitute criminal recklessness by a group of people, led by Netanyahu, who are prepared to shatter the foundations of our existence merely to continue holding on to power.
- Some of the decisions I made when I headed Israel's government were heavily criticized. Near its end, the Second Lebanon War was a source of incessant attacks on me and my cabinet members, as well as on the military commanders who waged the campaign. It does not matter at all that in retrospect, most critics realize it had been a successful – albeit not devoid of failures and mistakes – war with several strategic accomplishments, which have become clearer from a distance of many years. However, none of those who objected to the war at the time even thought about arguing that the government was motivated by the personal interests of the person in charge. The consensus among the overwhelming majority of Israelis is that the only motivation for expanding the military campaign and invading Rafah is not what's right for Israel, but part of a planned decision to sacrifice the hostages' lives in order to preserve the political life of the man who continues to push Israel into the abyss. It's time to stop Netanyahu and the government of Ben-Gvir and Smotrich. It's time to flood the streets with millions of resolute opponents to surround the group of outlaws leading Israel to a crash and stop them before it's too late.

When Netanyahu Lost the Security Cabinet

By Nahum Barnea

- **As of the time of this writing, Hamas had not yet replied to the Egyptian proposal. When an entire country waits days and nights for the redeeming note from one person, Yahya Sinwar, that says something about how dire our situation is. Each of the war cabinet ministers has hopes of their own. Gallant, Gantz, Eisenkot and Deri hope for a positive answer; Ron Dermer is deliberating. He finds it hard to go beyond the narrow space for maneuvering left to him by his patron. It is not by chance that he is known as “little Bibi” behind his back. As for Netanyahu—if anyone were to say he is hoping for a negative reply, he would deny it vehemently. We can just say that a negative Hamas reply would make things much easier for him with Smotrich and Ben Gvir, with his base, with his family, with the White House.**
- **Netanyahu is a saint who likes his work to be done by others. When Netanyahu is asked why he refrained in the past from ordering Hamas to be toppled, he replies that he wanted to do this, but in the absence of a consensus in the security cabinet and among the security leadership, he was unable to enforce his opinion. That is an authentic explanation: it is very hard in Israel for a prime minister to order a warlike action that goes against the view of the army leaders. Ben-Gurion did this in the battle for Jerusalem in 1948, but that was a long time ago and it was Ben-Gurion. Netanyahu did have a consensus last Thursday. The war cabinet convened to discuss the Egyptian proposal. All the leaders of the security agencies supported the proposal: not just the chief of staff, the GSS director and Maj. Gen. (res.) Nitzan Alon who represents the IDF in the negotiations, but also Mossad Director David Barnea. So did the security cabinet members, including Dermer. People who were in the room came away with the impression that Netanyahu was surprised and terrified. As he saw it, he had been caught in a planned ambush, a plot. Since that day he has not convened either the war cabinet or the security cabinet, the forum led by Smotrich and Ben Gvir.**
- **The headlines condensed the disagreement into three words: hostages or Rafah; or as Thomas Friedman wrote in the New York Times, Riyadh or Rafah. The succinctness does not illustrate to the reader either the depth or the breadth of the dilemma. Rafah is far from being what it is customary to think about it; in contrast to the first months of the war, the hostages truly are the top priority at the moment, but not just them; Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, is not exactly what it is attributed to it. I will try to explain. The army decided this week to expand the area that is earmarked to house the million-plus evacuees who will have to move north from Rafah to an area that in the past housed the Gush Katif settlements near big Abasan and little Abasan, two villages in the Khan Yunis area. The IDF demolished them down to their foundations in the course of the war. Nobody knows exactly how long it will take to move the population; it could take a week; it could take a month or more. For now, a force of approximately two divisions is waiting to enter Rafah.**

- There is a big gap between the expectations created among the public, as well as among the international media, and the sober assessments of the security establishment. Netanyahu succeeded in planting expectations that a total victory would be achieved in Rafah. The four remaining Hamas battalions will be destroyed, Sinwar will be either caught or killed, and dozens of hostages, if not all of them, would be freed. The four battalions will perhaps be dismantled; that would be good news for all those who support the war, including the governments in Cairo and Washington. But Sinwar will not necessarily vanish: he is probably not even in Rafah. And the hostages, the living and the dead are spread around several places and under the control of several organizations. There is more of a chance that fighting in Rafah will cause their deaths rather than bring about their rescue.
- The IDF went into the northern Gaza Strip, into the refugee camps in the central Gaza Strip and into Khan Yunis with all of its firepower, on air and on land. That cannot be repeated in Rafah, not with Israel [already]. suffering a huge overdraft in international public opinion. It has no reserves for more pictures of killing and mass destruction; the pile of arrest warrants on the desk of the ICC prosecutor in The Hague is growing; more governments and more economic corporations are threatening to impose sanctions and sever relations. Primarily, most of the hostages' families have not a drop in willingness to further risk their loved ones' lives. After the families' protest comes the protest of the fighters' families, who will ask, why and for what are they being killed. Rafah, an official told me, will ultimately be a show, something that will enable the right-wing broadcasters to shout: we conquered, we won, we achieved the objective of the war, without them actually being reached.
- A television reporter will stand on a pile of rubble and declare: we caught Sinwar's other shoe. It will be a bluff. Netanyahu talked about Rafah but refrained from doing anything to carry out an operation. He is good at doing cost/benefit arithmetic. It was only in the last two weeks that he truly pushed for an operation in Rafah. That does not stop his mouthpieces from asserting that it was the other cabinet members who delayed the operation. If Sinwar's answer is negative, the process of evacuating the population will begin within days, and then it will be hard to stop an incursion into Rafah. Israeli officials believe that he will prefer to say "yes, but," and repeat his demand for an Israeli commitment, backed by international guarantees, not to resume the fighting. Sinwar is a murderer who deserves to die, but he has his own logic. When Israel's leaders repeatedly promise their voters they will resume the war and will kill him, he can only believe them.
- Rafah is not the Palestinian Masada. A deal will leave it by the wayside, more of a convenient argument than a strategic objective. President Biden, who accidentally called it Haifa (rhymes in English) will be able to forget the name again. But the Egyptian proposals includes other prices, very high for anyone who cares about Israel's security, prices that are almost impossible for the Netanyahu the politician. About 100 Palestinian murderers with blood on their hands will be released in exchange for the female soldiers. If we reach the second stage, hundreds more murderers will be released—or even worse—terrorist leaders, in exchange for male soldiers.

- It is understandable why Smotrich, Ben Gvir and their people are threatening to bring down the government. It is not out of obtuseness, malice, the scorn that Orit Struck and her colleagues feel toward all Israelis who are not like them— the majority of Israeli society. They truly hoped that October 7 would bring about an all-out war culminating in the expulsion of the Arabs and reshaping Israel as a messianic kingdom between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. They have faith. Netanyahu does not share their faith, but willingly or not, he is their partner. In the past, I wrote that his personal responsibility for the military failures on the morning of October 7 is debatable, but he cannot be absolved of responsibility for everything that has happened since. One way of examining a war is to review the strategic decisions that were made in the course of it, starting with the declaration of war on the first day:
- - On October 11, contrary to Gallant and the IDF's proposal, it was decided to attack in Gaza and to remain on the defensive in the north. Netanyahu did not make it clear what he wanted.
- - The next station was the ground maneuver. Netanyahu was opposed but did not fight for his opinion.
- - The fourth station was the first hostage deal. Netanyahu delayed a decision, again and again. In the end, Eisenkot threatened to quit. Netanyahu panicked and agreed.
- - The fifth station was the end of the first deal and the resumption of the ground maneuver. Looking back, this was a mistaken decision of the chief of staff.
- - The sixth station was the humanitarian aid. This was done months belatedly, because of an American dictate, after Israel paid and is still paying high diplomatic prices for it.
- - The worst station is the one that Netanyahu skipped over the day after. There was an opportunity three and more months ago when the humanitarian aid could have been used as leverage, when there were 20 brigades in the Gaza Strip or on the border, when Sinwar was weak and hunted when the Israelis were united, when Nasrallah was willing to return to an arrangement in Lebanon and thus enable 100,000 Israelis in the north and south to return to their homes and lives. Fear of the Palestinian Authority and its proxies, perhaps also the fear of the two Kahanists in his government, overcame logic.
- The debate over continuing the war is not just a debate between hawks and doves, right and left, victory-seekers against hostage-seekers. On one side stand those who are willing to pay a high price to return the hostages' homes, turn over a new leaf and reboot Israel; on the other side are those who believe that October 7 was a bad dream, a passing vision, and now it's morning and we can continue October 6 as if nothing has happened, including the regime coup, including the sectarian looting. There is nothing because there wasn't anything. Netanyahu is one of many. The Biden administration is tired of waiting for him. Biden doesn't have time: he has only six months until the elections. The thrust of US Secretary of State Blinken's visit to Riyadh this week was devoted to advancing the alliance between Saudi Arabia and the US.

- **Israel was supposed to have been the third partner: that was important to legitimize the deal with Saudi Arabia in American public opinion and to strengthen the coalition against Iran. The conclusion was that it wouldn't happen with Netanyahu. It is possible even without Israel. "The world has gone crazy," an American who visited Saudi Arabia this week told me. "In Saudi Arabia, the ruler puts the religious fanatics in jail; in Israel, he lets them run the country."**