



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

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Reuters

Israeli Cabinet Authorizes Response to Hezbollah Strike

Israel's security cabinet authorized Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government to decide on the "manner and timing" of a response to a rocket strike in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights that killed 12 teenagers and children, and which Israel and the United States blamed on Lebanese armed group Hezbollah. Hezbollah denied responsibility for the attack on Majdal Shams on Saturday, the deadliest in Israel or Israeli-annexed territory since Palestinian militant group Hamas' Oct. 7 assault sparked the war in Gaza. That conflict has spread to several fronts and risks spilling into a wider regional conflict. Israel has vowed retaliation against Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Israeli jets hit targets in southern Lebanon during the day. But there were expectations a stronger response could follow the security cabinet meeting convened by Netanyahu in Tel Aviv. [Read More "As Israel Prepares to Strike Hezbollah, Western Efforts Seek to Avert All-Out War in Lebanon" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Axios

US Warned Israel Against Targeting Hezbollah in Beirut

The Biden administration warned Israel if it hits Hezbollah targets in Beirut in response to a deadly strike on the Golan Heights "the situation would likely spiral out of control," according to one Israeli official and one US official. President Biden's senior adviser Amos Hochstein spoke to Israel's Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant and told him Israel has the right to defend itself against Hezbollah, but must avoid an all-out escalation and minimize civilian casualties, an Israeli official said. The Israeli official said Hochstein expressed concern that if the IDF strikes Beirut, Hezbollah would respond by firing long-range missiles at Israel, which would likely lead to even further escalation. An escalation between Israel and Hezbollah would likely freeze negotiations over the Gaza hostage and ceasefire deal, Israeli officials said.

Ynet News

Iran Warns Israel Against 'Adventure' in Lebanon

Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesperson warned against any Israeli "adventure" in Lebanon after the deadly Hezbollah rocket attack on the Golan Heights. Tensions on the northern front have been rising with constant attacks from Hezbollah drone swarms and missile barrages fired at civilians. Hezbollah's latest attack has reportedly crossed a line, prompting Israel to vow to respond in kind. Iran, as Hezbollah's benefactor, warned Israel from retaliating in Lebanon and dragging the country into full-scale war. Iran's threat comes against the backdrop of its involvement in terror threats in the region. The IDF ascertained the missile Hezbollah launched was an Iranian-made Falaq-1. Iran has also been supplying the Houthis with missiles and drones, one of which has hit Tel Aviv in the past month, killing a civilian and injuring others.

Associated Press

An Israeli Airstrike Hits a School Sheltering People in Gaza

Israeli airstrikes hit a school used by displaced Palestinians in central Gaza on Saturday, killing at least 30 people including several children. Seven children and seven women were among the dead taken from the girls' school in Deir al-Balah to Al Aqsa Hospital. Israel's military said it targeted a Hamas command center used to direct attacks against Israeli troops and store "large quantities of weapons." Hamas called the military's claim false. Civil defense workers in Gaza said thousands had been sheltering in the school, which also contained a medical site.

Associated Press journalists saw a dead toddler in an ambulance and bodies covered with blankets. Shattered walls gaped and classrooms were in ruins. People searched the rubble-strewn with pillows and other signs of habitation. Meanwhile Israel's military ordered a new evacuation of part of a designated humanitarian zone in Gaza ahead of a planned strike on Khan Younis in the south. The order was in response to rocket fire that Israel said came from the area. [Read More "Israeli Forces Battle Palestinian Fighters in Southern Gaza" \(Reuters\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Israel Explores Options on Demand to Block Armed Gazans

The Israeli government is exploring various ideas for preventing armed combatants from moving to the north of the Gaza Strip from the south, in an attempt to prevent hostage negotiations from falling apart while also satisfying the prime minister's insistence on incorporating such a provision. Negotiations continued during Mossad Director David Barnea's brief visit to Rome, where he met for about an hour and a half with officials from Qatar and Egypt, who are acting as mediators in the talks. While there, Barnea provided a document on Israel's response to Hamas' latest proposal and lays out the red lines that Prime Minister Netanyahu has recently stated publicly. In addition to preventing the movement of armed combatants into northern Gaza, these include Israeli supervision over the Philadelphi corridor, which runs along the Gaza-Egypt border, and the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt, to prevent arms smuggling across that border.

Ha'aretz

PM Delays Evacuation of Wounded Children From Gaza

Prime Minister Netanyahu ordered delaying the transfer of sick and wounded children from the Gaza Strip to the United Arab Emirates for treatment. The source stated that Netanyahu made this decision due to the deaths of 11 children and teenagers from the rocket strike in Majdal Shams. The Physicians for Human Rights organization condemned the decision, calling it "a cruel game by the Israeli government with children's lives." Last week, Netanyahu instructed government ministries and security agencies to implement a plan for transferring patients from the Gaza Strip to a third country for medical treatment via Ramon or Ben-Gurion airports.

According to a statement signed by Cabinet Secretary Yossi Fox, the agencies were directed to "immediately implement a plan for patients in complex medical conditions who need to continue their treatment outside the Gaza Strip."

Erdogan Threatens to Invade Israel

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan spoke at a party rally, making a rare explicit threat to invade Israel while addressing the ongoing war in the Gaza Strip. "We must be very strong so that Israel cannot strike Palestine," he said. "Just like we entered Karabakh and the way we entered Libya, maybe we'll do the same thing. There's nothing we can't do. We have to be strong." Erdogan referred to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which resulted recently in Azerbaijan taking control of the breakaway region. Azerbaijan notably managed to regain control of the territory with the help of Israel and Turkey, with Turkish forces not entering the fighting. In Libya, however, Turkey played a major role in the civil war. [Read More "Calls for Condemnation, Removal From NATO After Erdogan Threat" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Times of Israel

Starmer Says He Pushed Herzog on Gaza Ceasefire

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer told Israel's President Isaac Herzog there needed to be "immediate steps" towards a ceasefire in Israel's conflict with Hamas in Gaza, London says. "The Prime Minister said there must be immediate steps towards a ceasefire, so that hostages can be released and more humanitarian aid can get in for those in desperate need," Starmer's office says in a statement. "The Prime Minister reiterated his ongoing support for Israel's right to self-defense in accordance with international law," the statement says. Starmer met Herzog in Paris where both were attending the Olympics. [Read More "France Investigates Death Threats Sent to Israeli Athletes" \(Reuters\)](#)

The All-Out War Dilemma

By Avi Issacharoff

- In late July 2006, the IDF attacked targets in Kana, southern Lebanon, in the course of the Second Lebanon War. The IDF accidentally killed dozens of civilians, including 21 [sic] children. That incident was in many senses a turning point in the war. The American administration decided after the high civilian death toll to urge Israel to conclude the war quickly. The rocket attack on Majdal Shams, which also killed children and teenagers, could have the opposite result and is likely to worsen the war that has been underway on a relatively low profile for the past nine months and turn it into a far larger war. Effectively, this painful incident has brought us closer to a full-scale war between Hizbullah and Israel than we have been since October 7.
- The rocket that Hizbullah fired on the soccer field in Majdal Shams was a terrible operational accident by the Shiite terror organization. One can assume with a high degree of certainty that the people who fired the rocket hadn't been aiming at the target that was struck: Majdal Shams is a Druze village, and most of the local residents are Syrian citizens and consider themselves Syrian, and not Israeli. Many residents of Majdal Shams have relatives in Syria and Lebanon, and Arab social media, including Palestinian social media, brimmed with criticism of Hizbullah and stated explicitly that the village in question was not Israeli and that the victims were not Jews.
- Furthermore, the rocket attack on a playground that killed 11 children served to intensify the criticism that Hizbullah has come under in Lebanon and across the entire Middle East. As things were, Hizbullah was under intense criticism in Lebanon and beyond and stood accused of doing the Iranians' bidding instead of serving Lebanese national interests. Israel now faces a dilemma. Should it retaliate powerfully, as logic would seem to dictate, striking at a range of Hizbullah targets and thereby run the risk of a full-scale war, or, alternatively, should it show restraint, given the situation in Gaza and the ongoing war there? A wide-scale attack on Hizbullah and targets across Lebanon might strike many Israelis as a necessary decision, but we need to understand the price of a full-scale war with Hizbullah and its ramifications.
- The IDF in its current situation probably does not have the abilities and the means to secure it a swift victory in Lebanon. Even in Gaza, victory is nowhere on the horizon. Starting a full-scale war in Lebanon will lead us into a painful war that will last for months and will probably be ended with a ceasefire, notwithstanding hollow statements about "total victory." The Israeli home front will find itself under intense and ongoing fire every day, all day long. To reiterate, all that will happen while a lot of human and material resources are being devoted to the war in Gaza, which the prime minister has refused to end or even to reach an agreement that would free hostages in exchange for a ceasefire. There are a lot of politicians in Israel, including members of the government, who think that there is a simple solution: to attack the State of Lebanon and its infrastructure.

- **Statements along those lines are hardly going to make Hezbollah and the Iranian decision-makers quiver; they always place the State of Lebanon's interest second to Hezbollah's Shiite interests in any event. In fact, destroying Lebanon and its infrastructure will help create even greater dependence by the civilian population on Iran and Hezbollah on the day after the war. Ultimately, even after the painful incident in Majdal Shams, Israel needs to ask itself what it can expect to achieve from a full-scale war in Lebanon. What would be the purpose of a war of that kind? Can its objectives be achieved? What is Israel's exit strategy from that war, not only What is its entry plan? Without clear answers to those questions, a war in Lebanon will yield absolutely nothing except for massive destruction and death on both sides of the border.**

Israel and Hezbollah Closer Than Ever to All-Out War

By Amos Harel

- For many months, Israel has been playing a sort of Russian roulette in the north. Many thousands of rockets and hundreds of drones have been launched by Hezbollah at communities in the Galilee and Golan, so far not causing an incident with mass casualties. Statistics gave way on Saturday afternoon, in a soccer pitch in the Druze village of Majdal Shams, on the slopes of Mount Hermon. Eleven children and teenagers were killed by a heavy Falaq rocket launched by Hezbollah. Another 29 people were injured, some of them seriously.
- Hezbollah's fire was a response to an Israeli attack in the village of Kila, in which four members of Hezbollah's commando Radwan Force had been killed earlier. The defense establishment convened on Saturday for urgent consultations, with anonymous sources warning of a severe response. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu can participate in these discussions only from a distance. His egotistic, superfluous insistence on extending his visit to the United States over the weekend left him in Washington while Israel and Hezbollah are closer than ever since October 7 to an all-out war. It's hard to say that this was totally unexpected.
- After hours of deliberations and delays, his office announced that "Netanyahu had decided to come back as quickly as possible." Expressing condolences for the deaths of the youths in the Golan was left, as is usual recently, for the IDF spokesman. Dealing with failures is not something Netanyahu does. Throughout the war with Hamas, Israel took care to manage the confrontation with Hezbollah as a secondary arena. At the war's start, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and some senior IDF officers pushed for a pre-emptive strike against Hezbollah, but Netanyahu was reluctant to do so, partly due to heavy American pressure. Since then, both sides are exchanging increasingly heavier blows, but have refrained from an all-out war. The most aggressive measure used by Israel has been a series of assassinations of senior commanders in the Shi'ite organization.
- Hezbollah has gradually intensified its responses to these strikes, recently launching salvos of 100 to 200 rockets at a time, sometimes up to 40 kilometers (about 25 miles) from the border, in response to every assassination. This is what it did on Saturday, when it fired dozens of rockets at the Galilee, Mount Hermon and the northern Golan Heights, even though no senior commander is known to have been killed in the Israeli attack. In the absence of a real Israeli strategy, the assassinations were marketed as an appropriate response to Hezbollah's aggressiveness. In practice, their impact is unclear. They certainly did not restrain the organization. Now, it's likely that Netanyahu, Gallant and the defense establishment will decide on a harsher retaliation. Some of the people involved believe that Hezbollah can be pushed into a corner through a few intense "days of combat," without being dragged into an all-out war. This is a wager, the results of which are hard to anticipate.

- **What is already clear is that not reaching a hostage deal and a cease-fire with Hamas in the south, which have been on the agenda for a long time, will complicate things in the north even further. Israel preferred not to engage in all-out war on two fronts at once. It's possible that it will now face escalation in the north without having stabilized the south. Netanyahu's promises of a total victory in the US, with even a cap displayed for all to see in honor of his trip, now seem emptier than ever. It's possible that only determined American intervention will halt the deterioration.**
- **The three senior American figures who met Netanyahu toward the end of his trip – President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris and the Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump – presented very similar positions regarding the end of the war between Israel and Hamas. According to declarations they've made in recent days, all three believe the war should end soon and include a total cease-fire, along with the return of all the hostages still in Hamas captivity.**
- **And yet, the chances of a breakthrough in the negotiations are not good. On the contrary: The entire leadership of the defense establishment in Israel share the concern that the prime minister's latest steps are meant to ensure that no progress can be made in the near future. It appears Netanyahu is preparing the ground for another breakdown in the negotiations, with the escalation in the north only making things worse. Israel delivered its reply to the mediators on Saturday, referring to the latest document Hamas presented at the negotiations.**
- **A meeting is scheduled to take place, this time in Rome, between the Israeli delegation, headed by Mossad chief David Barnea, and the American, Egyptian and Qatari delegations. However, over the last two weeks, Netanyahu has seen to it that increasing numbers of restrictions have been added to Israel's positions, regarding issues such as Israel's continued control of the Netzarim and Philadelphi corridors in the Gaza Strip. His insistence throughout May, as well as the increased military pressure exerted by the IDF, helped bring about some moderation in Hamas' positions. Netanyahu is now wagering that a further hardening on Israel's side will lead to a further improvement in the terms of the deal, to Israel's benefit.**
- **The problem is that all the people involved in the negotiations are convinced that this is a risky wager. The opportunity to attain a deal may pass, with combat continuing and more hostages dying in captivity, as has been the case for many of them in recent months, given the terrible conditions they are being held in. Some of the demands Netanyahu is raising now are ones he conceded in January, when he was familiar with every comma in the drafts exchanged by both sides, as he is now.**
- **Much depends on Biden's position. In emotion-laden conversations with families of hostages he promised to act to reach a deal soon. This has not prevented Netanyahu, at the end of a frosty meeting with Harris, to give a briefing against the new Democratic presidential candidate and to launch an attack by his mouthpieces, accusing her of being sympathetic to Hamas and of foiling a deal, no less. Joining this attack was Trump, at the end of his meeting with the Netanyahu couple in Florida. It's likely that the attack on Harris was meant to please Trump, but this was risky as well, embarking on a direct**

confrontation with a candidate whose chances for a close competition with Trump are better than Biden's were.

- Politically, Netanyahu is close to having a temporary respite, with the Knesset going into summer recess that almost fully guarantees the stability of his government for the next three months. Seemingly, this recess affords him the option of changing course: to advance the humanitarian portion of the deal, including the release of women, the elderly, the sick and the wounded people among the hostages. It may also be possible to reach a wink-and-nod understanding with his radical right-wing coalition partners, Otzma Yehudit and Religious Zionism, regarding their temporary departure from the coalition, with a return after 42 days in the event that negotiations collapse due to a lack of agreement (highly expected) over the realization of the remaining part of the deal.
- Netanyahu is not showing any signs of rushing toward a deal over the hostages. It's obvious that the decision is in his hands, and that his main consideration is the chance for his political survival. The security cabinet, most of whose members expressed their support for the deal, is excluded from the decision-making process. In practice, only one person is navigating the process and he will be the one making a decision whose impact is almost as heavy as a decision on launching a war. The relative security felt by the coalition, despite the tension between Netanyahu and National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, is evidenced by the return of the pre-October 7 agendas. This time, without so many bells and whistles, ministers and lawmakers have returned to promoting the judicial coup, engaged in intensive legislation while obviously ignoring any dealing with the welfare of the public at large.
- Netanyahu can return home happy in "Wing of Zion." Polls taken over the weekend show a slight improvement in his electoral standing, nine and a half months after the massacre that occurred on his watch (a fact he took care to avoid mentioning in his speech at the Congress). Even if his coalition collapses somehow, it appears he is not far from achieving his ambition – to delegitimize any political partnership with the United Arab List, thus preventing his rivals from forming a coalition without Likud and ensuring another paralyzing tie in the next election, when it finally arrives. Two interviews on TV Channel 12 caught people's attention over the weekend.
- Adina Moshe from Kibbutz Nir Oz, who was kidnapped and then released in the November deal, described the curses and threats by Netanyahu supporters directed at hostages who were released in November after they dared demand the release of the rest of their friends who remain in captivity. She refused to be impressed by Netanyahu's eloquence in his speech before Congress, asking correctly how this speech made a hostage deal and the end of the war any closer. Ronen Neutra, an American-Israeli citizen whose soldier son Omer was kidnaped on October 7 during the fighting on the Gaza border, participated in meetings held in Washington between Netanyahu and the families of hostages as well as in the meeting with Biden. He complained, like others did, about the alienated attitude displayed by Netanyahu and about what appeared to be an unwillingness to advance a deal. These words may spur more Israelis to take to the streets to demonstrate and demand a deal in the near future. It remains to be seen what

the heads of the defense establishment are willing to do besides giving frequent anonymous briefings to the media, in order to tell the public the truth about the negotiations and to try and push Netanyahu into a corner, and perhaps finally move him to sign a deal. It's sad to say this, but the opportunity may have already been missed.