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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

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Reuters

Israel Returns Bodies of Over 80 Palestinians to Gaza

Israel returned the bodies of more than 80 Palestinians killed in its military offensive in the Gaza Strip, as Israeli airstrikes killed at least 18 more people, the Palestinian Ministry of Health said. Yamen Abu Suleiman, the director of the Palestinian Civil Emergency Service in Khan Younis in southern Gaza, said it was unclear whether the bodies had been dug up from cemeteries by the army during the ground offensive, or whether they were "detainees who had been tortured and killed." It said Israeli forces had "stolen" 2,000 bodies since Oct 7 from dozens of cemeteries, which they bulldozed during their ongoing military offensive. There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military on the return of the bodies. In the past, Israel has said it returned bodies after checks they were not Israeli hostages who had been held by Hamas since the Oct. 7 attack on Israel.

Associated Press

UN Fires Staffers After Involvement in Oct 7 Attack on Israel

The UN said it fired additional staff members from its agency for Palestinian refugees, bringing the total to 9 employees terminated, after an internal investigation found they may have been involved in the Hamas-led Oct. 7 attack against Israel. The UN secretary-general's office announced the move in a statement to journalists. Farhan Haq, deputy spokesperson for the secretary-general did not elaborate on the UNRWA staffers' likely role in the attack or on the evidence that prompted its decision. The 9 fired included staffers who previously had been fired over the claims. The agency fired 7 employees over the allegations. The UN's internal watchdog has been investigating the agency since Israel accused 12 UNRWA staffers of being involved in the attack on Israel, in which militants killed 1,200 and abducted 250 people.

Times of Israel

7 IDF Reservists Wounded, 4 Seriously in Southern Gaza

Seven reservists were wounded, including four seriously, during fighting in the southern Gaza Strip, the Israel Defense Forces said. The troops, of the 205th "Iron Fist" Reserve Armored Brigade's 9215th Battalion, were taken to a hospital in Israel for treatment. According to an initial probe, the troops were wounded by an explosive device or grenade hurled at them by a Hamas operative. Four of the reservists were seriously wounded, two were listed in moderate condition, and one was lightly injured. Also, an Israeli truck driver was lightly injured by a rocket impact near Kibbutz Re'im after a barrage of some 15 rockets were fired from the Khan Younis area in what was the latest in a series of attacks, bringing the total number of rockets fired at Israel from the Strip since Friday to around 40. [Dig Deeper "Hamas's Central Gaza Battalions Still Effective, Believed to Hold Hostages"](#) (Times of Israel)

Jerusalem Post

Hamas, Israel Must Say Yes to Hostage Deal, US Say

The United States urged Israel and Hamas to finalize a three-phase agreement for the release of the remaining 115 hostages, which it believes would lead to a permanent ceasefire that would calm regional tensions. “The United States continues to see a ceasefire in Gaza as the crucial step to helping calm broader tensions, in addition to, of course, securing the release of hostages and addressing the ongoing suffering of the Palestinian people in Gaza,” US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said. “He’s reiterating that all parties need to look for reasons to say ‘yes,’ to an agreement” and “not look for reasons to delay or say, ‘no,’” Miller said. “As the Secretary has emphasized, this is an important moment for the region, and it is critical that parties make the right decisions,” he stressed. Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty asked US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a phone call to pressure Israel to “seriously engage” in Gaza ceasefire talks, the Egyptian foreign ministry said in a statement. Abdelatty also asked his US counterpart to pressure Israel to stop practicing the policy of “brinkmanship,” the ministry added.

Times of Israel

Death Toll From West Bank Raid Rises to 3, Palestinians Say

The PA health ministry raises the death toll from an Israeli raid in the northern West Bank from two to three, adding Ahmed Ghannam, 19, to the tally. Palestinian accounts online share footage in which heavy gunfire can be heard. There is no verification that the fighting depicted took place at a hospital in Tubas where the injured from the raid were being brought. The occupation forces open fire at the people in the yard of the Turkish hospital in Tubas City, West Bank. The PA also said a teenage boy died of wounds sustained during a clash with Israeli forces in the northern West Bank town of Aqaba, raising the death toll in the raid to 4. Palestinian health officials say all 4 fatalities were caused by Israeli bullets. Another 7 people are injured.

Ha'aretz

Al-Sissi Sought to Give Trump \$10M to Boost Campaign

A Washington Post investigation published revealed details of a secret probe into classified US intelligence, which indicated that Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sissi sought to give Trump \$10 million to boost his 2016 US presidential campaign. Days before Trump became president in January 2017, a manager at a bank branch in Cairo received a letter from an organization linked to the Egyptian intelligence service, asking the bank to “kindly withdraw” nearly \$10 million in cash from the organization's account. Federal investigators did not learn of the withdrawal until 2019, but the new information ramped up an investigation that began two years earlier, the Post reported, which examined whether money moved from Cairo to Trump potentially violated federal law that bans US candidates from taking foreign funds. Investigators also sought to learn if money from Sissi might have factored into Trump's decision in the final days of his run for the White House to inject his campaign with \$10 million of his own money.

Officials: Biden Briefed That Iran Attack Timing and Details Still Unclear

President Biden and Vice President Harris were told by their national security team that it is still unclear when Iran and Hezbollah are likely to launch an attack against Israel and what specifically the attack might entail, three US officials said. Biden administration officials say they are working to prepare for countering the possible attacks and mobilizing diplomatic pressure on Iran and Hezbollah to try to minimize their retaliation for the assassinations by Israel of Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran and Hezbollah's top military commander in Beirut. Secretary of State Antony Blinken told his G7 counterpart that Iran and Hezbollah could attack Israel as soon as the next 24-48 hours. But in the meeting Biden and Harris had with the National Security Council in the White House Situation Room on the assessment was more nuanced, US officials said. The officials said Biden and Harris were told US intelligence expects a scenario involving two waves of attacks — one from Hezbollah and one from Iran and several of its other proxies. But it was still unclear to US intelligence who is going to attack first and what kind of attack they are going to conduct, the officials said.

Al-Monitor

'Several' US Personnel Injured in Rocket Attack on Iraq Base

Several US personnel were injured in a suspected rocket attack on the al-Asad air base in western Iraq, according to two US defense officials. The incident marks the first attack confirmed by the Pentagon to have harmed American troops in the region since a de facto truce set in in February between US forces and Iran-backed militias in Iraq and Syria. It is also likely to complicate the Biden administration's ongoing efforts to avert an anticipated attack by Iran and its proxies against Israel for last week's assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran. The rocket attack was not the first to target bases used by US troops in the region since February. But it comes as the US and Israel, along with other military commands and armed groups across the wider Middle East, are on edge over an anticipated Iranian attack, which could lead to a wider regional war. No group has claimed credit for the barrage in Iraq, and the US has not attributed blame. But Iran-backed groups in Iraq last week suggested they would retaliate for the killing of Haniyeh and a top Hezbollah commander by a separate Israeli strike in Beirut last week. One militia, Harikat an-Nujaba, issued a statement last week warning that Israel and the US had "opened the gates of hell upon themselves" due to the assassinations. The US has denied involvement in both strikes, while Israeli leaders have neither confirmed nor denied any role in Haniyeh's assassination. President Biden spoke with Jordan's King Abdullah in a bid to head off the expected Iranian attack, a day after Jordan's foreign minister, Ayman al-Safadi, met with Iran's newly elected President Masoud Pezeshkian in Tehran. Jordan scrambled fighter jets to help intercept airborne drones and missiles fired during the previous Apr. 13 attack by Iran and its proxies targeting Israel.

Hezbollah's Threat on Israel Currently Outweighs Iran's

By Amos Harel

- Ahead of the expected escalation in the Middle East – the response of Iran, Hezbollah and their partners to the assassinations in Tehran and Beirut – the parties are conducting a complex dance of signals and threats. Gen. Michael Kurilla, the head of the US Central Command, came to Israel to coordinate defensive preparations to contain the anticipated attack. The secretary of Russia's Security Council, Sergei Shoigu, arrived in Tehran. The superpowers are now part of the game. According to remarks by senior Iranian officials and articles in the country's media outlets, it appears the regime is still trying to formulate its response. Tehran must respond to its perceived humiliation (the killing of a senior Hamas official, Ismail Haniyeh, who was a guest of the Revolutionary Guards during his visit to Iran for the inauguration of its new president). But the Iranians, and especially their new president, presumably do not want a regional war. Iran will likely participate in a retaliatory operation, but there is no certainty that it will be harsher than April's missile and drone attack.
- However, Hezbollah's conduct is worrisome. The organization seems determined to avenge the killing of Fuad Shukur, the man sometimes called Hezbollah's chief of staff. An attack from Lebanon could be aimed at military and strategic targets in the north and center of the country and include heavy fire on a scale unprecedented in Israel. The threat from Lebanon is currently more dangerous than the threat from Iran, in light of the enormous number of missiles at Hezbollah's disposal, many of them precision-guided, as well as the proximity to Israel. Against this background, Israel's air defense system and fighter jet squadrons, which will assist in intercepting drones, are at particularly high levels of preparedness. An additional aspect of defensive preparations concerns the security surrounding senior figures.
- In view of the actions Iran and Hezbollah attribute to Israel, they might try to act in a similar manner. Israel will have to consider its response in accordance with the intensity of the fire and the damage caused by Lebanon, Iran and other players such as Iraq and Yemen. The main danger is that the strikes and counterstrikes will escalate into a wider confrontation. The American generosity, a direct continuation of the arms deliveries that arrived by air and sea in the first weeks of the war, contrasts with the ungratefulness demonstrated by the Israeli leadership. It is no coincidence that US President Joe Biden demanded from Benjamin Netanyahu in their most recent telephone conversation that the prime minister stop bullshitting him.
- Netanyahu seems to be betting that Donald Trump will win the November presidential election and is convinced that he will manage to overcome the pressure exerted by the Americans. So far, he has succeeded. The prime minister has been stalling the hostage deal for months. To the Biden administration's distress, he also prolonged the war and sent the Israel Defense Forces to capture the Philadelphi route and parts of Rafah. In the long term, Netanyahu risks a serious crisis with the Democrats, especially if Vice President Kamala Harris wins the election.

- In that case, he is liable to encounter tensions recalling those of the guarantees crisis in the days of President George HW Bush and Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, in the early 1990s. Biden had already reached the conclusion that Netanyahu is deliberately delaying a deal and has no desire to complete it. This also seems to be the conclusion of the heads of the Israeli defense establishment, who lost hope for imminent progress in the talks in part due to the escalation with Iran and Hezbollah.
- In recent days, an optimistic theory is making the rounds, according to which the recent assassinations in Tehran and Beirut will actually help Netanyahu clinch a deal from a position of strength. It is very doubtful that this is true. It is more likely that the prime minister is concerned above all with his political survival, and is therefore stalling all progress. Even for the Hamas leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, the incentive for the deal decreases when hanging in the balance is the possibility of a regional war that will accomplish what he intended to achieve with the October 7 massacre. Iran's and Hezbollah's threats to settle accounts with Israel worry the public, and some media outlets are urging the government to order the IDF to launch a preemptive strike on both fronts. Politicians have joined these voices, including candidates for defense minister who envision an all-out attack on Iran.
- These expectations and plans reflect a worrying ignorance of the IDF's current situation and capabilities. In fact, there is good reason for caution and for the hope that this round can be ended without an all-out war. At least the IDF has begun to communicate with the public about the nature of the new tension and to answer questions about the preparation of the home front. The government simply disappeared from the picture, except for empty threats from the prime minister and the defense minister. The bar for expectations from the government has fallen nearly to the ground – and still, we are in a rather astonishing situation, 10 months into a war, when it's not even known whether there will be flights to and from Israel in the coming days and residents are forced to try to gather the information on their own.
- While waiting for the attack, the Israeli media passes the time with the latest hoopla. At the center (again) is Brig. Gen. Barak Hiram. Only a few weeks ago, the IDF found no fault with Hiram's conduct on October 7, in the episode of the siege on the terrorists who barricaded themselves with hostages in the Kibbutz Be'eri home of Pessi Cohen. The officer himself invested great effort in smoothing things over with residents of Gaza-border communities, as part of his preparations to assume command of the Gaza Division. But at the ceremony marking the end of his tenure as the commander of the 99th Division, which he led in the Strip since the war began, Hiram triggered a new storm. In a speech that seemed to have been lifted from the talking points of the Haredi Zionist rabbis and spokesmen, Hiram (who does not wear a kippa himself) excoriated Israel society and made an oblique connection between the October 7 massacre and "Israeli culture," which he described as "devoted to the moment" and engaged in "pleasure and debauchery." According to him, "Our enemies saw this and believed that this would be the perfect time for our destruction."

- **The recovery from the war, he argued, was achieved thanks to the rediscovery of the "ancient values and beliefs that unite us all." Hiram is not the first division commander to cause a public uproar with his remarks during the war. He was preceded by Brig. Gen. Dan Goldfuss, who in a speech in May called on the country's leaders to be worthy of the sacrifice of the combat soldiers in Gaza. But Goldfuss addressed his remarks to the political leaders; Hiram seems to be slamming a wide swath of the public.**
- **At a time that could not be more sensitive for him, Hiram chose to anger large sections of the population again, including the residents of the Gaza border area, the protection of whom will soon be his responsibility, and some of the reservists who fought under him in the 99th. The wording of his speech expressed a superficial, simplistic outlook that failed to take into account the intense discord within Israeli society. This was neither accidental nor unique to Hiram. With vigorous encouragement from politicians on the right, commanders who fought in the Strip allow themselves to hand out grades to the public, and sometimes also to their own commanders, the generals of the General Staff.**
- **In light of the shock caused by the murderousness of Hamas' October 7 attack, a deliberate attempt was made here to create a distinction between the combat command levels and the echelon above them, which ostensibly bears sole responsibility for the failure and the massacre. In practice, successive chiefs of staff, generals, division and brigade commanders of various political stripes, with and without kippot, were partners in the various doctrines. And the army has no moral authority to complain about Israeli society, especially considering its own performance before and during the massacre. Like other officers before him, Hiram, who fought bravely in the war, would do well to take more care in choosing his words. He is making it harder for himself and the IDF right before assuming an assignment in which civilians' trust has become particularly critical. His remarks are inflammatory and unnecessary.**

Tell the Public the Truth

By Yoav Limor

- **If there was a civilian intelligence officer among the decision-makers who was in tune with public sentiment in Israel, he would tell them: The civilian public's resilience is critical for coping with the challenges of the coming days. Get out there. Speak to them. Prepare them. Unfortunately, that has not been done. Apart from IDF Spokesperson Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari's comments, no one has said anything—not the prime minister, not the defense minister, not the chief of staff or any other relevant general. They have all made do with making threats against the other side (or the other sides). And at times like this, threats have the opposite effect: they serve only to ratchet up the level of public anxiety and fear, and have an immediate effect on the stock market and the economy—stock prices plunge, foreign currency rates spike, flights get cancelled and consumption plummet.**
- **The reigning approach taken by the decision-makers has not changed: As soon as we have something to announce, we'll announce it. That's fine for normal times, but less in times of emergency. And for several days now, Israel has been in a mega-emergency, waiting for the unknown—at least that is the public's feeling. If senior Israeli officials believe that the public's feeling is justified, they need to speak to the public and explain. And if they believe those feelings are not justified, they need to speak to the public and explain that as well. Winston Churchill, to whom Binyamin Netanyahu likes to compare himself, spoke to the British people precisely at moments like these. When everything around looked gray and threatening; when clouds of war cast a shadow over everything—that was precisely the moment his leadership stood out.**
- **His most memorable speeches weren't the ones in which he spoke about accomplishments and took credit for them, but about blood, sweat and tears. Churchill understood very well that leadership is not built by means of clashing with the senior professional ranks—and he knew how to clash with them—but rather by means of acting responsibly and taking personal responsibility. And mainly, he put Britain before anything else—even though that ultimately cost him his job, despite Britain's victory in the war.**
- **The Israeli public must trust the leadership; otherwise, it will find it hard to follow it down the volatile path we are likely to be taking in the coming days, perhaps even the coming period of time. Some of the decisions aren't dependent on Israel: The nature and results of a Hizbullah/Iran attack will determine the future to a great extent. If Israel is able either to fend off the attack or to live with its results, this round might end with the two sides trading punches. If the price Israel pays is higher than it can live with, we will probably be dragged into an escalation in the north, and possibly across the entire region. This attack will certainly be coordinated, but it is not clear whether it will be carried out simultaneously. Hizbullah will try to avenge the assassination of its chief of staff, Fuad Shukr, presumably by hitting military targets and sites inside Israel, with a goal of causing deaths.**

- **The organization has the capability of carrying out such an attack at any moment, and will only need a short amount of time between making the decision and its execution. That means Israel has to remain on a state of high alert, especially in the defense systems, which could face a more complicated challenge than ever before in downing precision-guided missiles from Lebanon. Vis-à-vis Iran, there is more time. Its clock works differently, and its attack—due to the distance and the type of weapons it has in its arsenal—requires ongoing preparation. In any event, it looks like Tehran is waiting for a United Nations Security Council deliberation on the assassination of Ismail Haniya (scheduled for tomorrow) before deciding how to react. Even then, Israel has a large capacity for detection and interception, certainly when it can be assisted by the United States and other Western and Arab friends.**
- **General Michael Kurilla, commander of the United States Central Command, arrived in Israel yesterday to coordinate the various theaters of operations, as he did on the eve of Iran’s last attack in April. Israeli officials had hoped that his visit would have a cooling effect on Hizbullah and Iran, but the Iranians responded with a mirror image of the visit by hosting Russia’s minister for national security in Tehran. This combination of events illustrated yet again the unusually volatile nature of the current situation and the ease with which the superpowers might be drawn into the war and find themselves in an unplanned clash between them. This is an extreme scenario, but we live in extreme times in which all sides take bigger risks than in the past. The public must understand this. As is, ten months into the war, the public has more questions than answers—about the hostages, the displaced persons, even about the real state of the war in Gaza and the scope of the damage that has been inflicted on Hamas, the senior leadership needs to speak to it, even if the public’s feelings are unjustified. Instead of bandying slogans about sweeping, lightening victories over the enemy (or enemies), the Israeli leadership would do well to don a suit of modesty and tell the citizens the truth: there are hard times coming. It is going to need the public to get through them.**