



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM  
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Thursday, October 31*

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# News Excerpts

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## Al-Monitor

### **CIA Chief Returns to Egypt in Last-Ditch Effort for Gaza Deal**

CIA chief William Burns will reportedly travel to Cairo for talks on a possible deal for a hostage release and a cease-fire in Gaza. The CIA chief met in Doha with Mossad chief David Barnea and Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed al-Thani. The office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated, "The sides discussed a new unified framework that integrates previous proposals and also takes into account the main issues and recent developments in the region." It went on, "The discussions between the mediators and Hamas will continue in the coming days in order to evaluate the feasibility of talks and the continued effort to advance a deal." Netanyahu denied reports that Israel had received an offer for Hamas to free four hostages in exchange for a two-day cease-fire. A statement from his office read that Israel had not received such a proposal and if it had, "the prime minister would have accepted it immediately."

## Reuters

### **Israel Wages Deadly Gaza Strikes as Northern Areas Issue Plea for Help**

Israel pummeled the Gaza Strip with new bombardments that killed at least 30 people, Palestinian medics said, a day after one of the deadliest single strikes of the year-old war killed scores in the north of the enclave. Eight of the victims were killed in a strike on the Salateen area of Beit Lahiya in northern Gaza. The area is near where medics said at least 93 people were killed or missing in an Israeli strike Washington called "horrifying." The Israeli military assault that has laid waste to the Gaza Strip and killed tens of thousands of people shows no signs of slowing as Israel wages a new war against Iran-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon and its backer, the United States, after a year of failed attempts to broker ceasefires for both. Northern Gaza, where Israel said in January it had dismantled militant group Hamas' command structure, is currently the focus of the military's assault.

## Times of Israel

### **IDF: Gaza Strike Targeted Spotter, Wasn't Aimed At Building**

An Israeli military official said that an attack on a five-story building in which Gaza health officials said scores of deaths took place was aimed at a binoculars-holding spotter in the building and that the intent was not to destroy the structure. The admission came after a widespread international outcry over the strike that appeared to kill dozens of Palestinians, many of them women and children. The IDF official agreed to provide details only on condition of anonymity, citing military protocol and the ongoing investigation into the incident. The official said the building was not known to be a shelter for civilians and that it collapsed as a result of the strike on the spotter.

Times of Israel

## **Trump Told Netanyahu He Wants Gaza War over by Time He Enters Office**

Former US president Donald Trump has told Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that he wants Israel to wrap up the war in Gaza by the time he returns to office if he wins the election, two sources familiar with the matter this week. The message was first conveyed when the Republican presidential nominee hosted the Israeli premier at his Florida Mar-a-Lago resort in July, according to a former Trump administration official and an Israeli official. While Trump has publicly confirmed having told Netanyahu that he wants Israel to win the war quickly. The former US official stressed that Trump wasn't specific in his appeal to Netanyahu and could well back "residual" IDF activity in Gaza, so long as Jerusalem has officially ended the war.

Ha'aretz

## **Israel's Anti-UNRWA Laws Spark Fresh Fears Among Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza**

Officials from the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian refugee administration called for urgent intervention by the international community to block new legislation that would ban the United Nations Relief and Works Agency from operating in Israel. UNRWA workers in the West Bank, speaking with Haaretz, voiced fears that the legislation would compromise the agency's ability to pay salaries for its thousands of employees, including teachers and healthcare workers, and could lead to the collapse of the agency's services. The potential impact in Gaza could be even more severe. Hussein al-Sheikh, Secretary-General of the PLO Executive Committee, wrote on X that the legislation's passage compels the international community and Arab states to support UNRWA and its employees. He emphasized that as an occupying power, Israel is obligated to adhere to the decisions of the international community and the UN Security Council. Palestinian officials warned of wide-ranging economic and social repercussions from the legislation.

Axios

## **US Gaining Confidence Lebanon Ceasefire Can Be Reached**

Negotiations for a ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah have made significant progress in the last 24 hours but the Biden administration hasn't reached a final agreement with either Israel or Lebanon, two US officials with direct knowledge of the issue said. A ceasefire deal would stop more than a year of fighting between Israel and Hezbollah and significantly de-escalate the regional war in the Middle East for the first time since the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks on Israel. It would be a significant achievement for President Biden in his final months in office. A US official said Biden adviser Amos Hochstein's mediation trip to Beirut last week made progress towards a deal, especially around Hezbollah's willingness to cut a deal with Israel separate from the war in Gaza. Israel's public broadcaster Kan published a draft of the ceasefire agreement dated Oct. 26.

Jerusalem Post

## **Hezbollah Agrees to Withdraw Beyond Litani**

Despite Hezbollah's declarations throughout the war, the terrorist organization has agreed to drop its demands and is ready to withdraw beyond the Litani River, Lebanon's MTV website, which is associated with Hezbollah opponents reported. The report indicated that Hezbollah agreed to establish a demilitarized zone, with all its weapons to be moved beyond the river. It was also claimed that Hezbollah no longer insists on being directly connected to events in Gaza. MTV Lebanon noted that a three-day ceasefire draft is being discussed in Lebanon, and American officials are expected to present it to Israel in the coming days. It was also noted that Amos Hochstein, Biden's envoy to the region, told Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati that he sensed a change in Netanyahu's position, which gave him hope regarding the contacts. [Read More "US Supports Israel's Right to Go after Legitimate Hezbollah Targets in Lebanon, State Dept Says"](#) (Jerusalem Post)

Times of Israel

## **Iran Will Deliver 'Definitive, Painful' Response to Israeli Attack**

Iran will deliver a "definitive and painful" response to Israel's recent attack on its territory, likely before the US presidential election on November 5, CNN reports, citing an anonymous senior source. The source, who has knowledge of deliberations in Iran tells the network: "The response of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Zionist regime's aggression will be definitive and painful." Israel has been expecting a potential Iranian response to the strike, itself retaliation for Iran's Oct. 1 barrage of ballistic missiles on the country. But Iran has so far been seen as seeking to minimize that strike, and it was unclear whether it would attempt a major response. Israel has warned Tehran that any further attacks on its territory will be met with resolute action. [Read More "The Next Round in Iran, Gaza After UNRWA, and a War Widow's Plea for the Haredi Draft"](#) (Times of Israel)

## **Israel Won't Pull All Troops Out Until There Is a Deal**

By Shirit Cohen

- **Negotiations over a political deal for ending the war in Lebanon: US Special Envoy Amos Hochstein and US Middle East Envoy Brett McGurk will arrive in Israel today with a goal of making progress on talks for a political deal. Their meetings in Israel are expected to include Minister Ron Dermer, Netanyahu's point man on the talks. On the table: an initial framework agreement to achieve a ceasefire, during which the sides will discuss the details of an agreement. This is the Americans' plan for reaching an agreement quickly since, otherwise, the gaps between Israel and Hizbullah still appear large, with Israel insisting on retaining the right to continue to operate in Lebanon with American backing if Hizbullah violates the agreement.**
- **The military objective approved by the security cabinet prior to launching the ground operation in Lebanon—removing military infrastructure from all villages adjacent to the Israel-Lebanon border—will be achieved in the coming weeks. During that period of time, both sides will have to come to an agreement and settle their differences over United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701. Israel wants to expand that framework, whereas the Lebanese side wants it to be implemented as it has to date. American pressure to make progress on a Lebanon deal comes alongside ongoing tensions vis-à-vis Iran.**
- **CNN quoted a senior official involved in the talks in Iran who said Tehran plans on responding to Israel's attack in a way that is "definitive and painful." Although the source did not cite precise timing, he said Iran's response would probably occur before the American presidential elections. Israeli officials have clarified throughout the last day that Israel will not pull its troops out of Lebanon until an agreement that meets Israel's security needs is reached. The main point of disagreement from Israel's perspective is the right to continue to fight against Hizbullah if the latter tries to approach the security zone.**
- **Lebanon sources told Al-Hadath a Saudi network, that Israel had "walked back its demands and accepted a Hizbullah withdrawal to seven kilometers from the border instead of 15 kilometers." Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati said Lebanon was hopeful a ceasefire agreement would be achieved in a matter of hours or days. Political officials told the network that Hizbullah is not eager for a deal at this stage. According to reports, the terror organization has not accepted the Israeli proposal for a ceasefire and predicts it will have an opportunity to flip the equation via the ground operation currently underway in southern Lebanon. At the same time, Lebanese Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri denied reports he had struck a deal with US Special Envoy Amos Hochstein.**
- **Berri said that Lebanon was not prepared to change "even one letter" of Resolution 1701. He said Hochstein did not mention Resolution 1559, which demands the dissolution of militias in Lebanon, or a change to the international forces. He also said that as far as he is concerned, Lebanon has achieved all of its demands concerning the ceasefire for the**

**deployment of the LAF and the implementation of Resolution 1701. According to the Lebanese official, he has reached an agreement on the matter with Hochstein and is awaiting a positive response from Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu.**

## **Israel Is Running Out the Clock in Lebanon and Gaza**

By Amos Harel

- Like they do every month or two, the TV channels' newsrooms have once again been flooded over the last two days with rather optimistic forecasts of an expected breakthrough in the contacts for a cease-fire in Lebanon and in the Gaza Strip. But behind this hope for finally getting some good news concerning the hostages is the less heartening reality. Diplomats are coming and going all over the Middle East, the Biden administration is expending its last efforts before the US presidential election in six days, and officials in Israel are convening for dramatic late-night consultations.
- But in practice, in spite of the resolute opinion of defense officials in favor of agreements on both fronts, which was reported in these pages, no real movement exists as of yet in the indirect contacts with Hamas. As for Lebanon, the chances look better, but a great deal of work is still necessary. Progress before the election would be a pleasant surprise. The position of the Israel Defense Forces, which is mostly supported by the other security services, is that these agreements are genuinely needed and the willingness to reach them is growing. Israel has achieved most of the military accomplishments it wanted to achieve, both in Lebanon and in Gaza. Now it must beat out two ticking clocks.
- In Gaza, with the difficult conditions that the hostages have been subjected to for almost 13 months, the threat to their lives continues to grow. In Lebanon, the approaching start of winter will soon make the fighting difficult. The IDF is trying to finish up its last efforts. It ordered tens of thousands of residents of the Shi'ite city of Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley to evacuate before a heavy aerial bombardment – but in principle, the IDF prefers to end the fighting soon if it will be possible to reach an agreement.
- In the meantime, Hezbollah has officially announced the appointment of Sheikh Naim Qassem, Hassan Nasrallah's former deputy, as his replacement to lead the organization. The messages the group is sending out for external purposes continue to be uncompromising and militant. This is also what Qassem had time to say in his speech before the broadcast was cut off, possibly because of a cyberattack. In practice, Israeli and American assessments are that the remnants of Hezbollah's leadership prefer to strive for an end of the fighting in light of the losses and blows the terror organization has suffered. In a positive scenario, this means there's a chance to cut the link between the two fronts: to reach a cease-fire in Lebanon while the fighting in Gaza continues.
- A certain amount of flexibility is also possible in Lebanon concerning the Israeli demands for establishing stricter and more effective enforcement and oversight mechanisms. The Iranian position has great weight, and it seems that Iran is trying to end the war while still threatening a response to the air force's retaliatory attacks on October 26. It was reported in the United States that Amos Hochstein, President Joe Biden's representative to the talks, who will arrive in the region with the goal of renewing his attempts at mediation, said Iran is an "essentially naked" target – referring to the results of the attack, which basically put out service Iran's entire strategic air defenses.

- The leadership in Tehran will need to take into account that it's exposed to a further Israeli response, and also the possibility that the continuation of the war in Lebanon will lead to even more massive losses among Hezbollah's fighters and capabilities. Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati said he hoped for a cease-fire with Israel "in the coming hours or days." Still, reaching an agreement in the north will be complicated, because of the large number of issues left open and the numerous countries and organizations involved in the solution. In Gaza, in spite of the reawakening of the mediation efforts by the US, Qatar and Egypt, the picture is even more difficult. Decisions are made slowly inside Hamas – and in Israel, neither Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu nor his far-right partners in the government seem to be in any rush to reach a deal, in spite of the fears about the lives of the hostages.
- The length of the war and the relatively large number of IDF casualties over the last month have sharpened the view among the General Staff of the need to end the war on both fronts. These long-continuing problems also came out in a tempestuous debate over the burden on reserve combat soldiers, a lack of an equal distribution of the burden, and most of all, the government coalition's efforts to legislate Haredi draft evasion for generations into the future. The public sentiment on these issues has changed recently. A clear rift has occurred between the Haredim and the religious Zionists, the community that has suffered the greatest losses in the fighting, far beyond its relative share of the population. "The burden of service is clear everywhere. In every visit in Lebanon or in Gaza, we meet soldiers who have served 200 and even 300 days or more in the reserves since the beginning of the war," a senior IDF officer told Haaretz.
- The arguments made by religious combat soldiers and their wives about the danger and division of the burden are now aimed directly at Netanyahu and his partners from the two sectoral parties, ministers Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir. These ministers from the Religious Zionism party, for whom the continued existence of this government is critical to achieving their goals, are trying to deflect the criticism by using distractions, such as focusing on the fact that the IDF unnecessarily released tens of thousands of reservists at earlier age than required by law in recent years.
- True, it did happen, but the army's efforts to bring them back now are meeting only a partial success – and in any case, the numbers are nowhere near the numbers of young and healthy ultra-Orthodox men who have never served a single day in the army, or even in national service. Netanyahu is worried about the stability of his government. Smotrich is under attack from his voters, is doing poorly in the polls and is holding under the electoral threshold for entering the next Knesset – and broke out in tears at a meeting of his party's Knesset members over the large number of dead among his constituents.
- At the same time, the IDF is worried about other questions. The percentage of those reporting for service in their reserve units in Lebanon and Gaza is lower than what they are telling the outside world, and there are units (mostly in the Gaza Strip) in which the commanders need bureaucratic acrobatics to enlist the necessary manpower. The army's worry can be seen in a questionnaire from its behavioral sciences unit, which was recently sent out to reservists.



- **Among the questions: How much support have you received from your family and workplace during your reserve duty; will you report for service if you are called up again soon; and how many of members of your unit will also report in these circumstances? For now, the coalition is trying to find solutions to bypass the draft crisis in light of the demands by the Haredi parties to enshrine their draft evasion in law. In the meantime, the IDF, which doesn't make any moves on this matter without instructions from Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, is taking only measured, too-restrained steps. So far, 3,000 draft notices have been issued for a population of 60,000 young ultra-Orthodox men of the relevant ages. Only a few dozen of those who were ordered to report to the recruitment offices did so, and only 700 arrest warrants were issued for those who have refused to report – but there are no orders to enforce them or carry out any arrests.**
- **Later on, without a solution to the draft crisis, the IDF plans on issuing another 5,000 draft notices to Haredim. But this doesn't look like a process that will bear fruit quickly. A huge gap exists between the Israeli public's expectations on this question and the reality, in which the Haredim almost don't enlist at all – and all this is going on at a time when IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi says he urgently needs thousands more combat soldiers.**