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Israel and Middle East News Update

Tuesday, December 10

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Arutz Sheva

Israeli tanks are about 20 km from Damascus

The Lebanese Al-Mayadeen network, which is affiliated with Hezbollah, reported early Tuesday morning that Israeli tanks are now positioned approximately 20 kilometers from the Syrian capital of Damascus. Reports also indicated the IDF has taken control of nine villages in the southern outskirts of Damascus, near the border with Lebanon. At the same time, there were reports of extensive strikes in the Damascus area. Earlier, Syrian media outlets reported Israeli strikes on the Al-Shuairat military airport, east of Homs, and on Syrian army targets in the provinces of Raqqa and Al-Hasakah.

Times of Israel

Some 250 Israeli strikes hit Syrian military targets after fall of Assad

Israel appeared to be continuing its aerial campaign in Syria on Monday, targeting weaponry that Jerusalem feared could fall into the hands of hostile forces in light of the dramatic fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime on Sunday. Two Syrian security sources said on Monday that Israeli planes bombed at least three major Syrian army air bases that housed dozens of helicopters and jets in the biggest such wave of strikes on air bases since Assad was toppled. The strikes hit Qamishli air base in northeast Syria, Shinshar base in the countryside of Homs, and Aqrba airport southwest of the capital Damascus, the sources said.

Times of Israel

Sa'ar confirms Israel hit chemical weapons sites and long-range rockets in Syria

Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar confirmed Monday that Israel had struck suspected chemical weapons sites and long-range rockets in Syria on Sunday, saying it did so in order to prevent them from falling into the hands of hostile actors. At a briefing for foreign media, Sa'ar stressed that Israel was acting as a precaution and that “the only interest we have is the security of Israel and its citizens.” “That’s why we attacked strategic weapons systems, like, for example, remaining chemical weapons, or long-range missiles and rockets, in order that they not fall into the hands of extremists,” he said.

AI-Monitor

Biden: US troops to remain in Syria 'to ensure stability' after Assad's fall

Outgoing US President Joe Biden vowed US troops would remain in eastern Syria to ensure stability after the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime on Sunday, emphasizing that Washington would work with “all Syrian groups” towards political transformation in Damascus. “We will help ensure stability in eastern Syria, protecting any personnel — our personnel — against any threats, and will remain our mission against ISIS — will be maintained, including security of detention facilities where ISIS fighters are being held as prisoners,” Biden said in an address from the White House on Sunday afternoon.

Reuters

With Syria's Assad gone, his PM agrees to hand power to rebel administration

Ousted Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's prime minister said he had agreed on Monday to hand power to the rebel-led Salvation Government, a day after the rebels seized the capital Damascus and Assad fled to Russia. The imminent transfer of power follows 13 years of civil war and the end to more than 50 years

of brutal rule by the Assad family, leaving Syrians at home and millions of refugees abroad hopeful yet deeply uncertain about their country's future.

i24 News

Hamas issues list of captives as ceasefire deal nears

A source in Cairo told the Qatari Al-Araby Al-Jadeed newspaper on Monday that negotiations for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip have reached "an advanced stage" after Hamas issued a preliminary list of Palestinian prisoners to Egyptian mediators, as well as a list of sick and elderly Israelis it would release in exchange. Israeli sources, however, deny the report. "The details in the report on the progress of the negotiations are not correct."

Reuters

Netanyahu to take the stand in his corruption trial for the first time

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel is set to take the stand on Tuesday for the first time in his long-running corruption trial under a court order that is likely to force him to juggle between the courtroom and war room for weeks. Israel has been waging war against the Palestinian militant group Hamas in Gaza for more than a year, during which Netanyahu had been granted a delay for the start of his court appearances. But on Thursday, the judges ruled that he must start testifying.

Commentary:

Yedioth Ahronoth

Between Success and a Missed Opportunity

By Ronen Bergman

- **Make no mistake: what has happened in Syria so far, at least, the most significant change out of all the earthquakes that have shaken the region since October 7, is the direct result of the knockout victory scored by Israel's intelligence community—coupled with its lethal operational wing, the IAF—over the senior members of the “resistance front”: Iran and Hizbullah.**
- **Had this victory not been achieved, the rebels never would have gone on the offensive, which was timed well to coincide with the Israel-Lebanon ceasefire. Even if they had attacked, they probably would not have gotten very far. Most likely, they would have come up once again, as they have throughout the entire civil war, against President Assad's brutal, corpse hungry cadres, Russian combat aircraft and the hardened generals of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, who command Shiite militias from Iraq and other parts of Asia, who were sent to the country to impose the will of the Iranian regime.**
- **“The Berlin Wall of unity for the axis of resistance has collapsed,” said a senior Revolutionary Guards source to a New York Times colleague of mine, Farnaz Fassihi, adding: In just 11 days we lost everything we had fought for 13 years for.**
- **Another official said, “This is the worst thing to have happened so far. It is worse than losing Hamas, worse than the blows delivered to Hizbullah, which was the regime's very flesh and blood, more horrific than even Nasrallah's death.”**
- **In a split second, the main anchor of the Soleimani doctrine went up in smoke. As one Western diplomat stationed in Beirut said: It collapsed in such a non-violent way, that regardless of the fact that we of course praise any violence that was not used, there is also a further humiliation for the axis members that invested enormous resources, and in the case of Hizbullah also shed quite a lot of blood, in order to prop up the Assad regime, but at the end of the day they didn't come to fight and Assad's soldiers abandoned their positions.**
- **All this begins at the second Archimedean point of historic upheaval. The first, of course, was October 7, the first convulsions of the entire event.**
- **The second was the paggers operation and a string of operations that followed and transformed the regional picture and caused such heavy damage to the resistance front that it will probably never recover.**

- The success was so very great that Israel actually completely missed its final strategic development. The original idea was to strike a deal with Assad, to convince him that it was in his interest to turn his back on Iran and Hizbullah, to accept Assad as the devil you know and to recognize his brutal dictatorship as long as he promised there would be no arms smuggling into Lebanon.
- When these plans were first drafted, they appeared to be delusions of grandeur. On August 29 of this year, the strategic adviser of one of the heads of the intelligence community presented at a closed, very limited meeting, his plan, the plan of his boss and of other senior officials in the intelligence community and in the military, for drastic change to the war's objectives and prosecution.
- "We believe it will be possible to deliver a victory blow to Hizbullah with a string of proactive operations that will land on them like the [Biblical] plagues of Egypt and strip it of most of its capabilities, destroy its leadership and turn it into a shadow of itself," he said at the time.
- The adviser said/dreamed/audaciously-predicted, "We will need to deal with Iran similarly—to strike it with an intense blow; then Israel will be able to essentially dismantle the eastern side of the Shiite axis, the Qasem Soleimani vision. Hamas has been almost completely destroyed; Hizbullah has suffered a ferocious blow and no longer possesses its doomsday weapon—a massive bombardment of the [Israeli] home front that would destroy entire parts of Israel, and Iran has been stripped of its aerial defenses,[and is] vulnerable."
- "In this situation," the person continued, "we—that is to say, Israel— will make an offer to Assad that he cannot refuse: to join the West and to expel the Iranians and Hizbullah, which will already be a weakened actor and far less dominant, from his country in exchange for renewed international legitimacy and assurances from the United States that his rule would continue unhindered."
- Even before the finale of this fantastical plan presented by the adviser the final stage that includes Assad's voluntary departure from his forced membership and from the debt he owes to the Iranians, the Russians and Hizbullah, which saved him from the civil war—the speaker struck the people attending the meeting as more delusional than a visionary.
- The terrible failure of October 7, coupled with the inability to defeat Hamas for many long months, created a crisis of confidence in the defense establishment's abilities, including in the eyes of some of its own members.

- **Yet now these same people, led by the heads of the IDF Intelligence Directorate, the Mossad and others, and in which the commander of Unit 8200, Brig. Gen. Yossi Sarial, has been a particularly loud voice inside the IDF, came along and said: Using the intelligence they provide and to the IAF's special operations and bombing raids, Israel will be able to hit Hizbullah and Iran and emerge with only minor damage?! But that is what happened and led to a victory that members of the intelligence community have divided into "Ten Plagues":**
 - **The assassination of Hizbullah Chief of Staff Fuad Shukr**
 - **The pagers operation**
 - **The walkie-talkie operation**
 - **The assassinations of Radwan Force Commander Ibrahim Aqil and the entire group of commanders responsible for the plan to conquer the Galilee**
 - **The strike against rockets that Hizbullah had hidden in uninhabited military areas**
 - **The strike against rockets that Hizbullah had hidden in urban areas**
 - **The assassination of Nasrallah and his right-hand man, the Iranian commander in Lebanon, Abbas Nilforushan**
 - **The assassination of Hashem Safieddine, Nasrallah's intended successor as Hizbullah secretary-general**
 - **The ground maneuver in the villages along the border that dismantled the organization's infrastructure that had been built near Israeli civilians**
 - **A 'death of the first-born' strike in Iran: Tehran has been stripped of its air defense capabilities needed to protect its leader, and has lost its ability to manufacture surface-to-surface missiles in the heart of its Holy of Holies.**
- **"This is what victory looks like," reads one of the documents summarizing the campaign, "Nasrallah decided to link the theaters [of war by saying] as long as there is fighting in Gaza, there would also be fighting in Lebanon. The pressure on him was ratcheted up, and he ratcheted it up from his side as well. Then, in mid-September, we decided to enact the new security doctrine we were forced to adopt following October 7, pivoting from containment to taking the initiative, and we carried out the 'Ten Plagues to the Axis' plan.**
- **"In light of the plan's success, Hizbullah has capitulated, the Iranian leader has capitulated and they have both retreated with their tails between their legs. This victory will come to be studied in military**

- academies around the world. We hope we will also study what we learned the hard way: From containment to initiative,” the document concludes.
- Even with all due praise, there is an important lesson to learn here: Israel’s failure to know that the rebels were planning an attack. Even if we missed that secret, which was certainly very well guarded, there is also the problem of the major failure to assess the abilities of Assad’s army correctly.
 - At the end of the day, Israel missed a significant strategic development; there is no consolation in the fact that the development also came as a surprise to the Russians, Hizbullah and the Iranians (not to mention Assad himself).
 - The excuses that will now certainly be heard about the limited funding, which can only be dedicated at the moment to the most urgent and most threatening issues, cannot excuse this development, in which the actor that Israel planned on trying to do business with, with which Israel had planned and had worked energetically via secret channels to win him “over to our side,” has suddenly evaporated. We are lucky the rebels acted now rather than in another year. Then, our defense against the injection of Iranian weapons into the region would likely have been completely dependent on an actor that appeared strong to us, but in actuality collapsed within the space of a mere 11 days.
 - Israeli intelligence failed to anticipate the rebels’ attack and its surprising success. From the moment the attack began Israel had no ability to influence the outcome. These lessons should weigh heavily in the event of any Israeli thinking of trying to play remotely with the destiny of regimes, regardless of how benighted they may be.

Yedioth Ahronoth

Most Important Testimony of All

By Netael Bandel

- It’s been nearly five years since the dramatic indictment was handed down against Binyamin Netanyahu, the first time such an event happened to a sitting prime minister.
- Tomorrow (Tuesday), he is expected to step onto the witness stand. The judges rejected Netanyahu’s attempts to push off and to limit the number of days he is scheduled to testify due to the war effort, and the defense is expected to open its case tomorrow at the Tel Aviv District Court.

- Proceedings were moved to the Tel Aviv venue from Jerusalem for security reasons. Notably, the indictment revolves around three cases: Case 1,000 (“gifts”), Case 2,000 (“Netanyahu-Mozes”) and Case 4,000 (“Bezeq-Walla”).
- Here are the main witnesses who have testified to date. “De Facto Editing of the Website”: Walla! CEO Ilan Yeshua, CEO of the Walla news site during the years relevant to Case 4,000, was the first person to testify in the case and his testimony lasted about six months. He was tasked with enacting the policies of the owners,
- Shaul and Iris Elovitch. His testimony, given in 2021, opened with a tough statement about what went on in the Walla News department during those years. Yeshua said that at first, the directive to skew Walla coverage of Netanyahu first came from Shaul Elovitch, but when requests from Netanyahu’s staff increased in scope, Elovitch transferred control to his wife, Iris (“it was extreme. We got into something that only grew...in real terms, actual editing of the website”).
- Yeshua said that “every news organization receives requests all the time regarding the coverage,” but he clarified: “Not like this. Not regarding either the amount or the type of the requests.” During his testimony, messages sent by Sara Netanyahu to Zeev Rubenstein (a close associate of Netanyahu and Elovitch) in which she complained about negative coverage on the site were introduced into evidence. “Yair and I have no energy to be only on this. I have other jobs in life, not only to guard Walla.”
- There were also gaps in Yeshua’s testimony. Responding to a question posed by Judge Rivka Friedman-Feldman about how he knows no similar requests were made to other news outlets, Yeshua replied, “Had they come through regular channels, they would have also gone to the news desk, not only to me.” Later, defense attorneys showed a large number of messages that were sent to all media outlets at the same time as they were sent to Yeshua. In addition, incidents were presented in which Yeshua operated out of personal interests.
- As Netanyahu’s media adviser, it was Nir Hefetz’s job at the time the indictment was handed down to represent Netanyahu to journalists. In light of his extensive involvement, his testimony touched on all three cases. “It would be impossible to exaggerate and difficult to put into words just how important the issue of the media is to him,” Hefetz said of Netanyahu. He noted that the premier was less interested in the Walla website, with the exception of coverage of the prime minister’s family.

- In Case 4,000, Hefetz testified that Netanyahu asked him to meet with Elovitch (“he made it clear to me that this website stood or was enlisting on behalf of the prime minister”) and that during their meetings, Elovitch complained about the treatment the Bezeq consortium he owned was given by the Communications Ministry. He said he reported these things to Netanyahu. Hefetz gave the prime minister a concrete request from Elovitch for help in getting the Bezeq-Yes merger approved. Regarding Elovitch’s intervention, he said, “Had they gone to Antarctica, the site would have worked with all its might against Netanyahu.”
- An unusual interrogation technique was used on Hefetz: He was brought together with a woman, who was not his wife, in the hallway of Lahav 433. He said, “Things were made clear. If I didn’t provide the version [they wanted], they would destroy my family. That was said dozens of times.”
- Nevertheless, Hefetz said he signed a deal to become a state’s witness and that the testimony he gave was truthful.
- In Case 2,000, Hefetz testified that in 2009, when he worked at Yedioth Ahronoth, Netanyahu took him out on the balcony at Likud headquarters in Tel Aviv and asked him to deliver a message to publisher Noni Mozes, saying that “he [Netanyahu] could cause the weekend edition of Israel Hayom to have 80,000-90,000 copies, but he cannot make it 50,000-60,000 as Moses claims he wants.” He testified that eventually, when he went to work with Netanyahu, he was asked by Sara Netanyahu to pass on a similar message but was stopped by Netanyahu himself. “Binyamin Netanyahu told me several times that Noni thinks he—that is to say, Binyamin Netanyahu—could cause Sheldon Adelson to lower the circulation of Israel Hayom.”
- Director General of Communications Ministry Shlomo Filber was a Netanyahu confidant who was appointed director general of the Communications Ministry. There, according to the indictment, he acted at the instruction of Netanyahu for the benefit of Elovitch’s Bezeq. Filber was the instigator of many events in Case 4,000; therefore, his testimony plays a central role. But after he recanted on the main points of his testimony, the State Attorney’s Office announced it would rescind the state’s witness deal it had signed with Filber. That process is still under way.
- Among other things, during his initial testimony Filber described “direction meetings” when he began work in which Netanyahu instructed him to curry favor with Bezeq and accompanied that with a hand gesture. But during cross-examination he recanted, claiming that the message was that he was supposed to act according to his own judgement in

order to increase market competition. He answered judges' questions, replying that his incriminating interpretation of Netanyahu's hand gesture was influenced by the picture presented to him by police detectives. Later he tried to recant once again: "It turned out completely the other way around."

- Filber described another meeting with Netanyahu about six months later in which the prime minister asked for an update on the way things were going vis-à-vis Bezeq. "The goal of that conversation was to see that I was dealing with the Bezeq issues, that I was promoting them and doing what was necessary." He said his activities in the Communications Ministry and his relationship with Bezeq were aligned with his policy and "there are certain factors that one could say curried favor with Bezeq on a point-by point basis." Filber said Hefetz met him three times on the Bezeq/Elovitch issue, and told them not to curry too much favor with them in order to keep them dependent on Netanyahu, but said he had not viewed that as a demand.
- In Case 1,000, Filber testified that Netanyahu hurriedly summoned him to the private home of Arnon Milchan, who at the time provided Netanyahu with cigars and champagne, and asked him to "answer questions" regarding the possibility that the Communications Ministry would approve a business move that Milchan wanted to initiate for the merger of the Keshet and Reshet [television] companies. [...]