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Israel and Middle East News Update

Friday, January 24

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Times of Israel

Israel said seeking 30 more days to withdraw from Lebanon, citing Hezbollah violations

Israel has asked the United States for an additional 30 days to carry out the withdrawal of its troops from southern Lebanon, according to Hebrew media reports Thursday, days ahead of the 60-day deadline stipulated in the fragile ceasefire agreement with Hezbollah.

Reuters

Gazans ready tent camps for families returning to north after ceasefire

Palestinians in northern Gaza prepared tent encampments for displaced families on Thursday, two days before they were expected to return to their home areas in accordance with the timeline of a ceasefire deal agreed between Israel and Hamas. On open ground surrounded by blown-out buildings, a group of men began putting up rows of white tents to receive families who are planning to return north on Saturday when the Palestinian militant group Hamas is due to release a second batch of hostages in return for dozens of Palestinians jailed by Israel.

i24 News

Gaza: 2,400 aid trucks entered since ceasefire, Hamas accused of theft

More than 2,400 humanitarian aid trucks have entered the Gaza Strip since the ceasefire began on Sunday, according to the UN on Wednesday. However, Gazans accuse Hamas of diverting this aid. "We see no aid or goods at reasonable prices," one resident told Israel's N12 news. "Hamas steals the aid and resells it to merchants, who set the prices they want at the expense of the entire population," another resident charged.

Jerusalem Post

Hamas is making big comeback in Gaza during ceasefire, expert warns

"From Hamas's perspective, they are making a major comeback as a dominant force in Gaza," Dr. Michael Milshtein, a senior researcher at the Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, told 103FM on Thursday regarding the developments in the Gaza Strip in the context of the hostage deal and the ceasefire.

Ynet

Trump to appoint Mideast envoy Witkoff to handle the Iran portfolio

U.S. President Donald Trump is expected to appoint his Middle East envoy, Steve Witkoff , as responsible for handling Washington's diplomacy with Iran, the British Financial Times reported on Thursday. Sources familiar with the details claimed that the move indicates that Trump is willing to consider a diplomatic solution before increasing pressure on the Islamic Republic.

Al-Monitor

In first Trump call, Saudi crown prince says trade with US could hit \$600B

Saudi Arabia and the United States plan to increase bilateral trade and investment by \$600 billion over the next four years, following a conversation between newly elected US President Donald Trump and Saudi Arabia's de-facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Trump's first phone call with a foreign leader since taking office Jan. 20.

Times of Israel

Tourism Minister Haim Katz tapped to run all 3 of Otzma Yehudit's former ministries

In a telephone vote on Thursday afternoon, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet approved the temporary appointment of Tourism Minister Haim Katz to the three ministerial positions left vacant when the far-right Otzma Yehudit party quit the government earlier this week.

Commentary:

Israel Hayom

Israel-UAE Reach Agreement in Principle About Gaza's Administration on Day After

By Ariel Kahana

- Israel and the United Arab Emirates have reached an agreement in principle about the way the Gaza Strip will be administered on the day after the war. Israel Hayom has learned that a "Palestinian invitation" will have to be extended for that agreement to be implemented, though no such invitation has been forthcoming so far.
- Speaking in the Knesset yesterday, Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer alluded to the complexities at hand. In response to a query by MKs Alon Shuster, Oded Forer and Amit Halevi, Dermer said, "I've been party to the work on the day after in Gaza. But any Israeli plan that is presented will

he dead on arrival because it is an Israeli plan. We need to enlist the United States and powers in the region to administer Gaza on the day after, precisely in keeping with the framework that was established by the prime minister. If we talk less we'll do more.”

- According to the principles set by Netanyahu, Gaza will not revert to being administered by either Hamas or the Palestinian Authority until it has undergone reform. The UAE's position is that a Palestinian state should be established, but it shares the criticism that has been aired by many members of the international community about the rampant corruption that plagues the PA and the incitement to terrorism in PA schools and media.
- According to information that has been obtained by Israel Hayom, the United Arab Emirates, which was at the forefront of the Abraham Accords in 2020, has agreed in principle to assume responsibility for administering the Gaza Strip on the day after the war, and to rebuild the Gaza Strip in a way so that it does not pose a threat to Israel. The UAE is the leading force in the Arab world against jihad and the use of Islam for violent purposes, and is prepared to inculcate those values in Gaza. However, Abu Dhabi believes that it should not be Israel that leads the way in the next stage, but the Palestinians themselves. Alternatively, as Dermer insinuated, that process might also be set in motion under either American or international patronage.
- Meanwhile, Steve Witkoff, President Trump's envoy to the Middle East who sewed up the final details in the hostage-release agreement, is expected to arrive in Israel in the coming days. Witkoff told Fox News that he would be leaving for Israel to be “part of an inspection team at the Netzarim Corridor and also at the Philadelphi Corridor. That's where you have outside overseers making sure that people are safe and people who are entering are not armed and no one has bad motivations, but we have to make sure that the implementation goes well.”
- When asked about a possible normalization agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, Witkoff said he believed that an opportunity would be at hand to end the war, and said, “I think you could get everybody on board in that region,” and said that included Qatar.
- Witkoff is also expected to use his visit to advance the talks about the next stage of the hostage agreement. Separately, President Trump said on Tuesday that he was considering a visit to the Middle East, though that is not expected to happen soon.

Yedioth Ahronoth

The Dramatic Information About Plans to Fire at Israel

By Ronen Bergman

- Over the course of the night leading up to Hamas' October 7 surprise offensive, IDF intelligence units collected a series of indications that Hamas was planning to fire rockets and missiles at Israel, Yedioth Ahronoth has learned. They also detected unusual activity by Hamas' aerial unit that could have pointed to the possibility that the organization was moving towards a state of emergency.
- These and other indications, particularly the ones about preparations for a potential rocket attack, came up during situation assessment meetings the IDF held over the next few hours—but they did not prompt the military to warn about a potential Hamas attack or to take significant measures to prepare for a possible attack of that kind.
- This information is drawn from a collection of documents reviewed by senior officials in the government and the defense establishment, and were presented to explain the fierce desire to push for IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi's resignation. They show that contrary to previous reports, the IDF's analysis that night was not limited to the assessment that Hamas was shifting its [level of] alert as part of an exercise and/or taking defensive measures to protect itself against a possible [Israeli] attack. Rather, the possibility that Hamas was preparing to attack Israel in the immediate future was taken seriously [by the military].
- Nevertheless, the IDF decided to take a small number of actions. In light of reassuring signs and the broad, absolute consensus of military and intelligence officials, the IDF chose to refrain from possibly "burning" sensitive intelligence sources over broad preparations for the third scenario [the possibility that Hamas was preparing to attack Israel in the immediate future]. These revelations shed a little bit of light on the events of the night leading up to the massacre. One of the participants in the deliberations described them in recent months as a "nuclear explosion."
- Since Hamas' offensive, other pieces of intelligence information collected by the IDF Intelligence Directorate and the GSS during the night before the massacre have been reported: Hamas activated Israeli SIM cards and other emergency assets they had used during the 2021 Operation Guardian of the Walls so that they would have cell service inside Israel post-invasion.

- But the preparations for possible rocket fire at Israel was, according to one senior official, “a very worrisome sign in-and-of itself, and all the more so when taken together with other worrying indications.”
- The IDF Southern Command, The Military Intelligence Directorate and the Operations Directorate are still conducting several inquiries into the events of that night. One person who attended deliberations about those investigations quoted one senior officer as saying, “Let’s say we’d come to the conclusion that it was all an exercise and that there was no real threat of attack. But the moment intelligence came in about [Hamas] plans to fire rockets, even though there was also reassuring intelligence information, why not demand first and foremost the evacuation of a place located adjacent to the division headquarters, where thousands of people [had gathered] without sufficient protection in the event of a rocket and mortar attack (he was referring to the Nova Festival—R.B.)? It wouldn’t have been the first party or performance the Southern Command had shut down.”
- Another question that emerges in light of the events of that night is whether the orders that were given —such as the chief of staff’s order to conduct photography sorties to investigate preparations for [rocket] fire were actually carried out.
- At 2:00 a.m. the IAF officer on duty at the air force control center received information about unusual activity by Hamas’ aerial unit. At the same time, more dramatic information about preparations for rocket and missile fire at Israel was collected.
- At 3:00 a.m. all of the signs cited above were presented at a situation assessment meeting held over the telephone and hosted by OC Southern Command Maj. Gen. Yaron Finkelman. The phone call was joined by officers from the Southern Command’s intelligence and operations branches, the commander of the Gaza Division, his intelligence officer, a colonel who commanded the Southern Command’s fire team (this is the IAF representative in the Southern Command), and two GSS officials. The situation assessment, which was written and summarized in simple words, addressed the above-mentioned intelligence information: “Unusual activity has been detected.” Maj. Gen. Finkelman also presented three possible explanations for what was happening on the other side of the Gaza border. The third was “preparations for a premeditated surprise attack, with a stress on invasion.”
- As reported here in November, Maj. Gen. Finkelman ordered a string of measures to be taken, but all were ordered to be carried out while strictly protecting [Palestinian] informants. “The Command commander gave

- orders with the following emphases: A, careful guarding of the intelligence that had arrived and prevented any activity that could alert the enemy that Israel knows that it is doing something unusual.
- **“B, keeping activity under the level that could lead to a miscalculation.”** One official close to the political leadership responded to this, saying, **“The Southern Command knew there was a party that was being held. They authorized it and extended it the previous day. Did this information—not about an invasion; about potential mortar and rocket fire—not meet the bare minimum requirement to disperse the Nova? And if not—what would have?”**
 - **The director of the IDF Operations Branch, Maj. Gen. Oded Basiuk, received a summary of the situation assessment and made several telephone calls to consult. Summarizing those calls, he wrote, “After consultations with the deputy GSS director, the commander of the Southern Command, the commander of the Operations Brigade and the director of the Research Department, there are three possibilities on the table: Hamas is conducting a ‘state of alert’ exercise; they are increasing their state of alert out of concern about an Israeli operation; they are preparing to launch an operation against Israeli in the coming hours, including a naval infiltration or attacking the [natural gas] platform infiltrating, kidnapping, an unusual terror attack, rocket fire, aerial infiltration.”**
 - **Maj. Gen. Basiuk may have given a series of orders to the operations brigade, which was under his command, and to its commander. These included investigating the status of Israel’s air and naval defenses of the [natural gas] platform. Despite the fact he understood there was a possibility of rocket fire, kidnappings and/or an “unusual terror attack” (the definition of that is not clear but it is clearly not good), the conclusion was as follows: “The director of the Operations Directorate stressed there was a need to be vigilant against security breaches and to make careful preparations in order to protect sensitive sources and to do everything in coordination with the IDF Intelligence Directorate (the reference here is to the operations division of the intelligence branch, but the slew of investigations carried out found that no action was taken regarding the possibility of moving troops along the border that night. There is disagreement about who bears responsibility for the fact that no action was taken).**
 - **IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi held a situation assessment meeting at 4:00 with Generals Basiuk and Finkelman, and addressed preparations for high trajectory fire. He ordered aerial vehicles be**

dispatched to gather intelligence in order to check out what was underway. Paragraph 6 of the situation assessment summary reads: “The chief of staff ordered the carrying out of quality, visual intelligence gathering... and noted that even if it was all an exercise—it was still an opportunity to gather intelligence.”

- But despite all the information that was gathered, paragraph 8 of the summary reads: “The chief of staff ordered that in the absence of additional significant developments, he would preside over another situation assessment in the morning.” Halevi’s office summoned several senior officers for a meeting at 8:30, but everybody knows what happened next.
- The heroes of that night bear responsibility for what happened on their watch. But focusing on them and what they did or didn’t do should not distract public attention from the main point: the people who were there did not act the way they did deliberately; their actions were the result of broad, deep failures across the board— theirs and many others’;. The October 7 disaster was not an accident, but an illness. In a variety of ways, it infected the entire security establishment, the political leadership and the intelligence community. One can only hope that the next chief of staf — and his bosses— should understand that these are problems that need to be dealt with in the most thorough way so we should never find ourselves in the same situation.