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Israel and Middle East News Update

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Ynet News

'The entire country is on high alert': Iran braces for joint US-Israel strike on nuclear facilities

Apprehension is mounting within the Islamic Republic due to a possible joint US-Israeli strike on their nuclear facilities, and the Iranian regime has elevated alert levels on its missile defense systems and reinforced defenses around key nuclear sites. Reports from the British Telegraph, citing senior officials in Tehran, indicate that additional air defense launchers have been deployed near critical missile sites as part of these heightened security measures. These steps are reportedly a response to growing fears of coordinated military action by Israel and the United States.

Al-Monitor

Iran's navy and IRGC hold missile drill in Indian Ocean as FM rules out US talks

The Iranian military held a missile drill in the Indian Ocean on Tuesday in an attempt to demonstrate "deterrent power" in the face of growing tensions with the United States and Israel. The Iranian navy and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' aerospace force fired ballistic and cruise missiles at naval and

aerial targets in the northern Indian Ocean and used drones to carry out reconnaissance operations along Iran's southeast coast, the IRGC-affiliated Tasnim news agency reported.

Times of Israel

Hamas: Deal reached for 'simultaneous' release of 4 slain hostages, Palestinian prisoners

Hamas and Israel reached an agreement for the release of four Israeli hostages' bodies and 602 Palestinian security prisoners, the terror group and an Israeli official said late Tuesday, which would an end to an impasse that risked collapsing the multiphase ceasefire agreement before its first stage was even completed. "An agreement was reached to resolve the issue of the delayed release of Palestinian prisoners who were supposed to be freed in the last batch," Hamas said in a statement. "They will be released simultaneously with the bodies of the Israeli prisoners agreed upon for transfer during the first phase, in addition to an equivalent number of Palestinian women and children."

Arutz Sheva

Egypt rejects Lapid plan: Gaza will be managed by the Palestinians

Egyptian sources on Tuesday rejected a plan for Gaza proposed by opposition leader Yair Lapid, which would see Egypt accepting responsibility for Gaza for 15 years. The sources, quoted by the Saudi television channel Al-Hadath, said that "Cairo rejects any proposal to manage the Gaza Strip. Gaza will be managed by the Palestinians and in coordination with them. Cairo is committed to rebuilding Gaza without displacement." Lapid presented his plan in public for the first time on Tuesday, at an FDD think tank conference in Washington. He had earlier

presented the plan to senior members of the Trump administration and to senior senators during his visit to the US.

Axios

White House envoy may travel to Middle East

Sunday in push to extend Gaza deal

White House envoy Steve Witkoff said Tuesday that Israel will send a delegation to Doha or Cairo in the coming days to discuss the next steps of the Gaza hostage and ceasefire deal based on principles that the U.S. has agreed to with Israel and Qatari and Egyptian mediators.

Reuters

At UN, Israeli former hostage appeals for ceasefire deal to go on

An Israeli woman kidnapped by Hamas Palestinian militants recounted her ordeal at the United Nations Security Council on Tuesday, telling the 15-member body she did not think she would make it out alive, and pleading for a ceasefire to continue. Noa Argamani was rescued by Israeli forces in June last year, eight months after she and her partner were taken by Hamas from a music festival in southern Israel. Her partner, Avinatan Or, is still held hostage and due to be released during the second phase of a ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas.

Ynet News

Hamas operatives stand trial in Germany for planning European terror attacks

The trial of four Hamas terrorists accused of managing secret weapon stockpiles across Europe for terror attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets began in

Germany on Tuesday. Authorities suspect that the weapons were intended for attacks on the Israeli embassy in Berlin, the area surrounding Tempelhof Airport in the capital, and the U.S. Air Force base in Ramstein, Germany.

Arutz Sheva

IDF strikes military targets in southern Syria including command centers and multiple sites containing weapons

The IDF on Tuesday evening struck military targets in southern Syria including command centers and multiple sites containing weapons, the IDF Spokesperson's Unit said. "The presence of military forces and assets in the southern part of Syria pose a threat to the citizens of Israel. The IDF will continue to operate in order to remove any threat to the citizens of the State of Israel," it added.

Times of Israel

Trump rips up Biden memo aimed at Israel on rights abuses using US arms

The Trump administration has rescinded a Biden-era order aimed at Israel that required the government to report potential violations of international law involving US-supplied weapons by allies, two US officials and a source familiar with the decision said on Monday. Signed by Biden last year, National Security Memorandum 20 (NSM-20) required all countries that receive weapons from the US to commit in writing that they will not use them to target civilians or restrict humanitarian aid.

Reuters

Russia's Lavrov aligns positions with Iran on nuclear programme

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Iran's top leaders aligned positions on issues around Iran's nuclear programme at talks in Tehran on Tuesday, Russia's Foreign Ministry said. Lavrov discussed a wide range of bilateral and regional issues with both President Masoud Pezeshkian and his Iranian counterpart Seyed Abbas Araghchi, a ministry statement said. "Positions were aligned on the situation around the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the Iranian Nuclear Programme," it said.

Reuters

Syrians back freedoms, constitutional process at landmark dialogue

Syrians agreed on Tuesday to form a committee to draft a constitution that enshrines justice, freedom and equality for all, according to the closing statement of a landmark national dialogue conference held at the presidential palace in Damascus. Billed by Syria's Islamist rulers as a key milestone following the end of decades of Assad family rule, the conference was attended by hundreds of Syrians who met at the so-called People's Palace in the hills above the capital.

Commentary:

Yediot Ahronot

Hamas is Regrouping and the IDF is Preparing for Renewed Fighting in Gaza

By Yoav Zitun

- **The crisis surrounding the release of terrorists, which has come amid mounting skepticism about likelihood of the ceasefire being extended to allow for negotiations to be held about the second stage of the hostage deal, has been complemented with the IDF's decision to raise its state of alert along the Gaza border in anticipation of a possible resumption of fighting.**
- **Presumably, Hamas has also been preparing for a possible resumption of hostilities and to mount an offensive of its own. The terrorist organization has capitalized on the last 35 days of ceasefire to regroup and to rebuild the companies and battalions that suffered casualties in the 14 months of fighting. Hamas has not abandoned its offensive plans either—plans that it executed with its October 7, 2023 surprise attack.**
- **Thousands of Hamas operatives took advantage of the pause in fighting to return to the northern Gaza Strip in the wake of the IDF's withdrawal from the Netzarim Corridor, which had bifurcated the Gaza Strip. The Hamas operatives headed north under the cover of the roughly half-million Palestinians who returned to Gaza City and its suburbs. Tens of thousands of those Palestinians who returned to the northern Gaza Strip found that their homes had either been damaged or destroyed and were without electricity or water, and turned around to return to the displaced persons' camps west of Khan Yunis.**
- **The thousands of Hamas operatives who went north joined thousands of other terrorists who had remained in the area—mainly in Gaza City—prior to the ceasefire. Israeli security officials' working assumption is that they have formed new military formations, though they are believed to be on a lower level than the formations that Hamas's military wing had prior to the October 7 massacre.**
- **Hamas's efforts are presumed to have included appointing new platoon, company and battalion commanders, renewed use of tunnels and other underground facilities that had not been found by the IDF, clearing bombs out of areas that have since been repopulated by Palestinian civilians and planting new bombs for use against IDF troops. The IDF has also tracked Hamas's efforts to load launchers with rockets and to install cameras that will allow Hamas terrorists to monitor IDF troop movements.**
- **This past week, at least three rockets were fired out of Al-Boureij and yesterday from Rafah. The rockets were apparently misfired in the course of Hamas's efforts to regroup and redeploy. The IDF also detected several observation drones that were sent aloft this past month by Hamas.**

- Separately, other drones were used by Arab citizens of Israel in an effort to smuggle arms into Gaza from Israel. All of those efforts were foiled. The IDF has also monitored Hamas's use of its civilian control as part of its efforts to regroup militarily and to increase its revenues. The terrorist organization has utilized the past few weeks of ceasefire to renew its hold on the municipal services provided to the Palestinians, including education and welfare. Hamas operatives have also set up number checkpoints across the Gaza Strip in a bid to preempt local clans and crime organizations, and has seized control of hundreds of tons of food, fuel and water that Israel has been sending into the Gaza Strip on a daily basis in keeping with the agreement.
- Hamas has also resumed levying taxes from the public, including on humanitarian aid that it distributes, which has allowed it to continue to pay its operatives' salaries. "Every day of ceasefire helps Hamas mobilize operatives and commanders and to pass on orders," said IDF officials. "It suffers from shortages in combat equipment, personnel and command and control capabilities as a result of the IDF's operation and in the absence of new resources. But this past month has proven that more work lies ahead until Hamas is defeated."
- Meanwhile, amid the overt reluctance that has been expressed by Israeli cabinet ministers to proceed to the second stage of the deal, which would jeopardize the coalition, the IDF is in the process of completing preparations for a resumption of the ground war in Gaza. The IDF is expected to send a large number of troops into the fighting, and it has been preparing new targets that, if attacked, will weaken Hamas's hold on the Gaza Strip. [...]
- Regarding the plan that was announced with great fanfare by US President Donald Trump three weeks ago with the encouragement of Prime Minister Netanyahu, Israeli defense officials have said that the most important and fundamental condition needed to implement that plan does not exist and does not appear likely to exist anytime in the future—third countries that are prepared to take in residents of Gaza who choose to leave of their own free will. This is an issue that the political leadership will have to tackle.
- Funding the operation and facilitating it logistically are considered to be solvable issues. A senior defense official said, "There are more obstacles and problems than practical chances of this ever getting underway. But if a pilot program is successful—say of a few hundred-thousand Gazans who leave—if they are able to get past checkpoints that are manned by Hamas, which is obviously opposed to [the plan], then that might

persuade others to leave as well, perhaps with a promise that they will be allowed to return to Gaza in the future.”

- The defense official said that neither Jordan nor Egypt will agree to take in Gazans, adding: “Gaps remain between statements and practical [implementation] on the ground, and this is still going to take time.”
- Some IDF officials are skeptical about the likelihood that Trump’s proposal will help Israel achieve its war objectives. “Even if we successfully get 10,000 or 100,000 or even 500,000 Gazans out without us being accused of a war crime, how is that going to lead to Hamas’s collapse? It may be true that under those circumstances Hamas’s domestic legitimacy will be damaged, but it will still have more than a million Gazans to use for its development and survival.”

Israel Hayom

Syrian Druze Form Militia Following Netanyahu’s Statement

By Ariel Kahana and Neta Bar

- “We won’t allow forces from HTS [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham] or the new Syrian army to enter the territory south of Damascus. We demand the full demilitarization of southern Syria, in the Quneitra, Dara and al-Suwayda districts, from the new regime’s forces,” said Prime Minister Netanyahu in a public statement.
- For decades, Israeli officials became accustomed to dealing with a Syria that was ruled by a powerful, centralized government that dictated policy. Ever since the Yom Kippur War, the Syrian regime has made sure to keep the border between the two countries quiet. Now, however, Syria is ruled by the leader of a militia. The country has remained peaceful for the time being, but the working assumption is that internal tensions and rivalries between the religious and ideological groups might erupt at some point, as might the ingrained hatred of Israel.
- Syria’s leader Ashara (otherwise known as Al-Jolani) certainly might have no intention of attacking Israel. But his ability to rule and control Syria over time from his seat in Damascus remains to be seen. If anti-Israel militias begin to attack IDF troops along the Israeli border, he may prove to be either unable or unwilling to act against the militias. That is Israel’s first concern.

- **Its second concern is Turkey. Syria has effectively become a Turkish client state that answers to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The Turkish president's hostility towards Jews is a well-established fact. In the course of the war Erdogan said that the day would come when he and his troops would clash with Israel. Apparently in a bid to preempt any such development, Israel is now seeking to demilitarize the area in which any conflagration of that kind might happen. Another possible development could be the emergence of an alliance of Turkish-backed militias that might begin to harass IDF troops, as part of Erdogan's antisemitic fantasies. Demilitarization will help avert that scenario from taking on shape and form.**
- **Third, Israel has been cultivating a healthy civilian relationship with the various groups that live in the districts cited by Netanyahu in his statement, and especially with the Druze community. That is the reason why Netanyahu extended his patronage to them.**
- **The above reasons appear to be what prompted Netanyahu to publicly demand that no weapons be deployed in the areas near the Israeli border.**
- **Meanwhile, a number of Druze militias that have formed in the Suwayda district of Syria announced yesterday that they would be opening a joint operations headquarters to allow them to function as an independent military force that is separate from the united Syrian army that the new regime in Damascus would like to establish.**
- **A number of organizations, most of which are affiliated with the Druze groups that supported the Assad regime, announced the establishment of an umbrella organization to facilitate security and stability in the Jabel Druze area. The militiamen posed for photos while bearing arms next to the organization's flag, which resembles the flag used by the Kurds' umbrella organization, the Syrian Democratic Front, but uses light blue and has a Druze star overhead.**