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Israel and Middle East News Update

Thursday, February 27

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Reuters

Hamas hands over bodies of four hostages, Israel frees Palestinian prisoners

Hamas handed over the bodies of four Israeli hostages while it waited for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners to be released by Israel in return, in an overnight exchange marking the final swap as part of a fragile truce in Gaza. The ceasefire came into effect on January 19 and has largely held, despite numerous setbacks. But its first phase is due to end this week and the fate of its next phase, which aims to end the war, remains unclear.

Jerusalem Post

New hostage release plan includes Egyptian forces in Gaza - report

Israel has agreed to a new procedure for releasing hostages, which includes an Egyptian presence on the ground, Kan 11 News reported on Wednesday evening. According to an Israeli official, the bodies of four hostages will first be handed over to Egyptian forces in Gaza. After the transfer takes place and the bodies have been identified, the next Palestinian prisoners will be released, KAN reported. “Only after definitive identification of the fallen will all Palestinian terrorists set to be freed in this phase be released—600 whose release was previously delayed, along with several dozen women and young Gazans arrested since October 7, 2023,” KAN quoted.

Times of Israel

IDF strike kills senior Hezbollah member involved in weapons smuggling to terror group

The Israeli Air Force announced Wednesday that it struck a “central terrorist” in Hezbollah’s Unit 4400, which is responsible for transporting and smuggling Iranian weapons into Lebanon. The strike in the al-Qusayr area of northern Lebanon came after the operative “repeatedly violated” the current ceasefire, including being involved in weapons smuggling to the Iran-backed terror group. The military said that the Hezbollah operative was attacked “while planning more smuggling.”

Reuters

Lebanon's new government wins confidence vote in parliament

Lebanon's new government won a confidence vote in parliament on Wednesday, following a speech by Prime Minister Nawaf Salam promising to push for economic and financial reforms and to start negotiations with the International Monetary Fund. Salam's government won the backing of 95 lawmakers in the 128-seat chamber. On Tuesday, the Iran-backed Lebanese group Hezbollah had given its backing to the government in a speech delivered by senior Hezbollah lawmaker Mohammed Raad.

Al-Monitor

IAEA warns Iran ramping up uranium enrichment as US sanctions intensify

Reports from the International Atomic Energy Agency show Iran has significantly stepped up its production of uranium-enriched to near nuclear weapons-grade levels, as tensions between Tehran and Washington worsen. Two quarterly reports by the IAEA, the United Nations’ nuclear watchdog, were sent to its member states and shown to multiple press outlets on Wednesday. The reports claim Iran has increased its stockpile of 60% enriched uranium by over 200

pounds since its last report in November. According to the IAEA, Iran now possesses an estimated 605 pounds of uranium enriched to 60%, while its total stockpile of enriched uranium now stands at 18,286 pounds, up by 3,725 pounds since November.

AI-Monitor

PKK leader Ocalan set to make historic peace call between Turkey and the Kurds

Suspense over what Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan will say in a long-anticipated message to his fighters has reached an all-time high following confirmation by Turkey's largest pro-Kurdish party, DEM, that it will meet with him on Thursday at the island prison where he is being held. The seven-member delegation, which will likely comprise six DEM lawmakers and one of Ocalan's lawyers, is expected to relay Ocalan's statement the same day, a DEM lawmaker speaking not for attribution told AI-Monitor.

Commentary:

X (Online)

Lapid Presents "Egyptian Solution" for Gaza

By Yair Lapid

- I presented a short time ago in Washington a plan for the day after in Gaza. At the center of the plan: Egypt will take responsibility for Gaza for 15 years; at the same time—Egypt's \$155 billion foreign debt will be wiped clean by the international community.
- After nearly a year and a half of fighting, the world is surprised to discover that Hamas still rules Gaza. No one in the current Israeli government has presented a realistic alternative. For political, religious and sometimes messianic reasons, the Netanyahu government has failed

to take steps to create an effective administration in Gaza that would force Hamas out.

- There are two large problems on our southern border that pose a threat to the security of Israel and the entire region:
- 1) The world needs a new solution for Gaza: Israel cannot agree for Hamas to remain in power, the Palestinian Authority is incapable of administering Gaza, Israeli occupation is undesirable and a state of ongoing chaos is a grave security threat to Israel.
- 2) The Egyptian economy is on the brink of collapse and poses a threat to the stability of Egypt and the entire Middle East. Its \$155 billion foreign debt has not allowed Egypt to rebuild its economy and to strengthen its military.
- We propose a single solution to those two problems: Egypt will take responsibility for administering Gaza for 15 years; at the same time, Egypt's foreign debt will be covered by the international community and its regional allies.
- During this period, Gaza will be rebuilt and conditions for self-government will be created. Egypt will be the central actor and will oversee reconstruction, which will further strengthen its economy. This solution has an historic precedent: Egypt ruled Gaza in the past. That was done with the Arab League's support, with the understanding that it was a temporary situation. The Egyptians had guardianship over the Gaza Strip on the Palestinians' behalf. That is what needs to happen once again today.
- The Components of the Plan
- The Rationale:
 - 1) Israel wants to transfer control over Gaza to an actor that isn't Hamas and has the ability to maintain security.
 - 2) Gaza cannot be rebuilt without an authorized body that will oversee the effort and maintain security, along with the State of Israel.
 - 3) Israel and Egypt have a deep and years-long relationship with the United States' support.
 - 4) Egypt has an interest in creating stability in Gaza and the entire region.
 - 5) Egypt wants to prevent [the implementation of] the idea of a population transfer from Gaza to Egypt.
 - 6) Egypt has an economic incentive that will strengthen the government and will help feed its citizens.
- The Model:

- 1) The current ceasefire will be completed until the release of all the hostages, while Israel will remain in the perimeter [a buffer zone inside Gaza along the Israeli border].
- 2) Egypt will take control over the Gaza Strip by means of a UN Security Council resolution, including internal security and civilian administration.
- 3) This control will be defined as a “guardianship,” with the goal of turning the Gaza Strip over to the Palestinian Authority following a process of reform and de-radicalization, with measurable criteria.
- 4) The reconstruction process will begin under Egyptian supervision, while Saudi Arabia and the countries [that are signatories] of the Abraham Accords will participate in work groups using the Negev Forum model.
- 5) The United States will invest in Gaza in cooperation with Egypt (in keeping with the Trump proposal).
- 6) Egypt will allow every resident of Gaza who wishes to leave and has where to go to do so in an regulated manner.
- 7) Egypt will act to prevent arms smuggling to Gaza, to destroy the tunnels and to demolish the remaining terrorist infrastructure.
- 8) An Egyptian-Israeli-American security mechanism will be formed to deal with immediate threats.

Yediot Ahronot

Outgoing Unit 8200 Commander’s “J’Accuse”

Against the IDF and Chief of Staff

By Yossi Yehoshua

- “Even if they thought it was just a Hamas training exercise that night, shouldn’t we have been prepared for it?”
- The event was held on Monday in the main auditorium in the Palmahim airbase. Nearly a year and five months after Hamas’s attack, the findings of the inquiries into October 7 were presented to the top IDF brass. Roughly 600 officers were in attendance, but the person who grabbed most of the attention was the commander of Unit 8200, Brig. Gen. Yossi Sariel, who has already accepted responsibility and resigned. He is scheduled to be replaced in another two weeks.
- Addressing the audience from the podium, Sariel furiously criticized Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Herzi Halevi and the inquiries. Importantly, his critique was germane and professional, not personal. Sariel and Halevi

are close friends who have known one another for many years, dating back from when Halevi was the commander of the 91st Division and Sariel was his intelligence officer.

- Following are excerpts from Sariel's speech, as related by several officers who were present in the auditorium: "At 6:29 on October 7, I failed at my mission as expected of me by my subordinates and commanders, as I demanded of myself and, most importantly and most painfully, as expected of me by the citizens of Israel whom I love so much. When I was appointed commander of Unit 8200, it was expected of me that things like this wouldn't happen, and it did happen. I, Yossi, failed. I recognize that what has been done can't be undone. [I can only] bow my head and ask for deep forgiveness."
- Brig. Gen. Sariel spoke about the IDF Military Intelligence Directorate's inquiries that were conducted under the former director, Aharon Haliva, saying: "The investigative processes were complex, powerful and candid. Six days that began at 08:00 and ended at 18:00, in which all of the colonels, all of the brigadier generals and all of the brigadier generals in reserves sat in a single room. It was difficult. It was rattling. There were moments in which I thought that the Military Intelligence Directorate's ship would sink, but thanks to the in-depth reviews you have [now] seen in depth inquiries."
- "I invite everyone in the auditorium to come to Unit 8200," he added, "to read the 148 pages of the inquiry's summary that sums up all of the unit's failures and mistakes, and mine personally. The inquiry doesn't belong only to us. Anyone interested should coordinate with my office and come to read and learn."
- At this point, according to officers who were in attendance, Sariel addressed the chief of staff personally and said, "I salute you for numerous chapters of unbreakable leadership that taught me and us, and gave us a lot of strength."
- "I bear 100% responsibility," said Sariel. "I neither need nor want to share my responsibility. October 7 was not an accident. It is a serious disease that spread in the military. The most important thing, to ask and to probe so that we might deal with the disease that has spread, hasn't been done. The crux is missing from the book, and I regrettably think that that isn't by chance."
- Sariel proceeded to go into detail: "I was raised throughout my entire life on the interface between the intelligence world and the operational world. Between intelligence officers and commanders. That interface studies things, especially when there are question marks. When we present

information that Hizbullah is about to shoot, there isn't any need for an interface between intelligence and the commanders. The information is given and the IAF knows how to prepare. When we present information that Iran is about to fire, there isn't any need for an interface. We need to prepare. The entire purpose of the interface is when there is information and the reason isn't clear. When use is made of an emergency asset and we don't know why, and the question now is: how do we prepare? I was raised throughout my entire life on the interface between intelligence officers and commanders, and that is the core of the use of IDF force.

- “We went onto the playing field, the IDF against Hamas. For the sake of comparison, we went [onto the playing field as] Barcelona against Maccabi Haifa, and on October 7 we received [i.e. lost] 0:15. We went [onto the playing field] as the strongest team. We didn't send [the] youth [team]. The Southern Command's intelligence officer was the top intelligence officer of an [IDF] command whom they wanted to promote to brigadier general; the division intelligence officer was one of the most prominent officers in all divisions. A reasonable commander of Unit 8200 (describing himself—Y.Y.), a wow [impressive] Operations Directorate director, an incredible IAF commander, an incredible and seasoned chief of staff—and they still defeated us over the course of many hours.”
- Sarel said that the IDF commanders have not met even once in the time since the war began to ask the essential questions. “The most complex and most difficult thing is that this team never stopped once in 507 days, not even for ten minutes, to ask how we failed as a team. Not once did we all sit down together, all of the central players, the commanders and the intelligence officers, to ask together how we failed that way as a team.
- When the IDF defeated Hizbullah, the IDF as a whole performed at its best, and we all won together under the command of the entire IDF General Staff. But when they defeated us, suddenly it's not the team. It's all because of two players, and the team didn't have the courage to sit down together even once for 15 minutes, without recording and without investigators, to ask what happened to us—not just to ask what happened to one player or another, but what happened to us as a team.”
- “The intelligence team,” he said, “did that under the previous military intelligence director. It was difficult and frightening, but that is what in depth and pointed inquiries are for. What happened to the team, what happened to the interface between the intelligence world and the operational world? That was never asked and never investigated. The crux is missing from the book; regrettably, I don't think that is a coincidence.”

- He cited as an example the language that was used by Hamas's leadership before the assault, which he said illustrated the importance of the IDF being prepared for any scenario. "On October 5, when Sinwar summed up the final decision to launch the attack, he cited two things that, had they happened, would have prompted him to call off the attack because of the need for surprise. The first was tanks [deployed] at [forward defensive] positions, and the second was drones in the air."
- Sariel went on to speak about the blindness that afflicted the top IDF brass. "I have a friend whom a lot of the people here know. His name is Oren Belitsavau. He was left blind by a suicide bomber who blew himself up beside him. Suddenly, all of the commanders were only blind when they ran a red light because their seeing eye dog told them to run the red light."
- Sariel revisited the preliminary signs from the night before the attack. "All the commanders knew that Hamas had activated SIM cards across the Gaza Strip and had activated their emergency assets. Now, the reason they did that wasn't clear. There were also reassuring signs—that's true—but had we asked a reasonable person on the street—not a graduate of intelligence officers training course or brigade commanders training course—whether those are the signs whether tanks should be waiting in their positions and whether there should be drones in the air, what would he say? And even if we thought that night that this was just a Hamas training exercise— shouldn't we be prepared in the face of an enemy exercise in the border area? All that requires is common sense and [the right] interface between intelligence and commanders, which hasn't been investigated so far."
- Sariel went on to ask more probing questions: "One of my brigadier generals in reserves asked—why is everyone focused on getting more information? We take ourselves to task in the inquiries as to why we didn't demand the use of more force—but given the information we had, why was everyone focused on getting more information instead of asking to do with the existing information and would have been the right way to prepare?"
- When he asked his next question, in which he implied that military officials have tried to shrug off their own responsibility, the entire auditorium held its breath. "Let's say that only two decisions had been made that night: [deploying] tanks to their [forward defensive] positions and [putting] drones in the air. Had Hamas called off (the attack—Y.Y.) and only a single [Hamas] company had become confused [i.e. misunderstood the orders] and tried to advance [towards Israel], they

would have taken [i.e. been cut down by Israeli] fire. [If that had happened,] we would be here with an inquiry into the greatest success ever. What would the summary look like then? Would [officers with] the Operations Directorate say that it [that success] had nothing to do with them? Would [officers in] the Southern Command have foisted that success on the division? Would the IAF have said it had merely acted on the instructions it received from the Operations Directorate? Or would everyone have been part of the success?”

- Echoing something that Ronen Bergman and Yuval Rabinovich reported this past weekend in Yedioth Ahronoth, Sariel also said Hamas had considered calling off its invasion at the last moment. “One senior Hamas official told his colleague three days after October 7 that an hour before the attack they considered calling it off because they didn’t see any [IDF] force—and they thought that the IDF might be preparing an ambush for them.”
- The IDF was paralyzed for several hours. Sariel described the situation that morning as follows: “There was a lot of activity on the ground and within the IDF General Staff, mainly a lot of civilians and troops that were scrambled and arrived, but the IDF as a whole didn’t function for many hours. And with inquiries every day, from morning until the comments stage, the only one that presented failures was the [military] intelligence [directorate]. All the other commanders only made a handful of mistakes. With the exception of the [military] intelligence [directorate], no one in the entire military presented even a single failure.”
- “When the [military] intelligence [directorate’s] investigator from that night presented [his findings], he addressed the mistakes and failures of the [military] intelligence [directorate]. When the chain-of-command’s investigator presented [his findings], the only failures by the commanders were intelligence [failures]. The entity known as the IDF collapsed for several hours, no blood flowed, but the Operations Division’s inquiry shows [or paints a picture] that it deserves a commendation for its performance,” said Sariel sarcastically. “I hope there is a truck filled with commendations waiting here.”
- At that point in his speech, Sariel commented on the argument that was made about the need to protect [intelligence] sources [as the reason for the decision not to respond visibly to Hamas’s preparations, for fear of burning sources—INT]. “The branch director slept at night because there wasn’t any problem with respect to the sources, and no one asked for her input. Nor was there any problem that necessitated protecting the

- sources. Besides, if you say that the intelligence that night was completely routine, then there certainly wasn't any problem to prepare."
- Sariel then said in conclusion: "This wasn't an accident; it is a serious disease that has spread. We in the military did not view wars that might erupt here by surprise as a relevant scenario; we did not treat Hamas's military wing as an army and that is why we allowed it to be on our borders just a handful of minutes distance from civilian communities. We thought we had a double insurance policy—the barrier and intelligence—that would not only wake us up, but would explain exactly what was happening. This is rooted in problems of culture, values and structure."
 - "A few years ago there was a politician who said that the fact that he is responsible doesn't mean that he is culpable," said Sariel in an allusion to remarks that Amir Ohana made regarding the Mt. Meron disaster during his tenure as public security minister. "And all of us in the military sneered at him, [saying] that the people in politics weren't raised like we were in officers' training course on the value of real responsibility. And in real time, when we defeated Hizbullah, then the entire IDF was responsible for the victory and delivered it, but when we collapsed in the face of Hamas for several hours the commanders were responsible but their subordinates were culpable."
 - Sariel concluded his speech on an optimistic note, saying: "The reason I'm optimistic is that I have confidence in the younger generation."
 - Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi took to the podium after Sariel. "Yossi, I'm glad that you said all that," Halevi said in response to Sariel's remarks. "I would advise you against starting a fight [between competing] schools [of thought], as happened after [the Second Lebanon War in] 2006. A religious disagreement between [the importance of] firepower and [ground] maneuvering. We only overcame it in 2012 and we understood the need to link [the two] together. That is how we won this war. If we leave here in order to spar, nothing will be gained. Balances need to be created between intelligence [officers] and commanders."