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Israel and Middle East News Update

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Reuters

Israel makes new Gaza ceasefire proposal but prospects appear slim

Mediators Egypt and Qatar have presented a new Israeli proposal for a Gaza ceasefire to Hamas, Egyptian state-affiliated Al Qahera News TV said on Monday, but a senior Hamas official said at least two elements of the proposal were nonstarters. Citing sources, Al Qahera said mediators awaited Hamas' response. Hamas said in a statement later in the day that it was studying the proposal and that it will submit its response "as soon as possible".

Times of Israel

Gaza hostage talks still stalled, official says, amid reports of incremental progress

A breakthrough does not appear to be on the horizon in the long-stalled Israel-Hamas hostage negotiations, an official from one of the Arab mediating countries told The Times of Israel on Monday amid several reports claiming incremental progress has been made in the talks. "There's a lot of noise, particularly from the Israeli side, about a potential breakthrough, but the same elements that have prevented a deal until now are still in place," the Arab official said.

i24 News

Hamas rejects Egyptian ceasefire proposal, refuses to discuss disarming

Hamas refused an Egyptian proposal for a ceasefire with Israel, citing the requirement that Palestinian factions disarm. A senior Hamas official told Al Jazeera on Monday that Egypt recently presented a new cease-fire proposal that includes a 45-day truce in exchange for the entry of food and shelter into the Gaza Strip. Half of the Israeli hostages would be released in the first week, the Egyptian plan stipulated. Hamas is demanding that Israel end the war, but Cairo has made it clear in its proposal that any longterm end to the fighting depends on Hamas disarming.

Jerusalem Post

Hamas unwilling to lay down arms in Gaza, Al Jazeera reports

Hamas told Al Jazeera that it was unwilling and it would be "completely unacceptable" to lay down arms, Al Jazeera reported on Monday. " Hamas informed Egypt that the gateway to any agreement is a cessation of hostilities and withdrawal, not disarmament of the resistance," Al Jazeera reported. The Hamas representative also told the Qatari outlet that the latest proposal involves the handover of living and dead hostages over the course of 45 days to extend the ceasefire and allow more aid into the Gaza Strip.

i24 News

Over 1,500 IDF soldiers join call to end fighting in Gaza

The protest movement initiated by the Israeli Air Force pilots last week is gaining momentum, with soldiers in the Armored Corps and Paratroopers Brigade joining

1,525 who signed a letter on Monday to urge the government to prioritize the release of hostages, even at the cost of suspending military operations. Among the signatories is former prime minister and chief of staff Ehud Barak, as well as several high-ranking officers.

Times of Israel

Educators, reservists, ex-diplomats are latest to urge hostage deal, even by ending war

A wave of public petitions calling for the return of hostages from Gaza even if it means an immediate end to the war continued on Monday, representing several more sectors of Israeli society, with thousands signing on to back the call originally made by Israeli Air Force reservists last week. Separate letters were published Monday in the name of some 3,500 higher education academics, 3,000 education officials, 1,500 armored corps soldiers, 1,000 parents, dozens of former Foreign Ministry officials, and IDF Spokesperson's Unit reservists.

i24 News

Saudi Arabia, U.S. advance civil nuclear deal, sidestepping Israeli normalization

The United States and Saudi Arabia are moving toward a landmark agreement on civilian nuclear cooperation, signaling a deepening energy partnership that notably excludes any linkage to Saudi normalization with Israel. According to U.S. Energy Secretary Chris Wright, the two countries are nearing a preliminary accord aimed at developing a Saudi civil nuclear program.

Reuters

Second round of US-Iran talks to be held in Oman,

Iranian media says citing foreign ministry

A second round of nuclear talks between the United States and Iran continues to be held in Oman's Muscat, Iran's state news agency IRNA said on Monday quoting Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei as saying. Tehran and Washington have said they held "positive" and "constructive" talks in Oman on Saturday and agreed to reconvene this week.

Times of Israel

Hezbollah claims it has handed over most sites in southern Lebanon to nation's army

Most military sites belonging to Hezbollah in southern Lebanon have been placed under Lebanese army control, a source close to the terror group said Saturday. A November 27 ceasefire that ended more than a year of conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, including two months of full-blown war, stipulated that only United Nations peacekeepers and Lebanon's army should be deployed in the country's south.

Al-Monitor

Lebanon's PM Nawaf Salam makes first Syria visit, meets Sharaa as border tensions loom

Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam met on Monday with Syria's President Ahmad al-Sharaa in Damascus, in his first visit to the neighboring country since taking office earlier this year. Salam was accompanied by Foreign Minister Joe Rajji, Defense Minister Michel Menassa and Interior Minister Ahmad al-Hajjar.

Reuters

Saudi Arabia plans to pay off Syria's World Bank debts, sources say

Saudi Arabia plans to pay off Syria's debts to the World Bank, three people familiar with the matter said, paving the way for the approval of millions of dollars in grants for reconstruction and to support the country's paralysed public sector. The plans, which have not been previously reported, would be the first known instance of Saudi Arabia providing financing for Syria since Islamist-led rebels toppled former leader Bashar al-Assad last year.

Commentary:

Yediot Ahronot

War Without Fighting

By Yoav Zitun

- Is there something in the army's activity in Gaza that it is trying to hide? IDF troops have been engaged for about a month of limited operational activity in the Gaza Strip since the ceasefire ended, and new Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Eyal Zamir and IDF Spokesman Brig. Gen. Effie Defrin have insisted on maintaining a policy of ambiguity on the matter.
- Most of the activity is being concealed—despite the lack of public support for the ground offensive at the start of the war that ended last August, with the seizing of the Philadelphi Corridor and the latest high-intensity action in Rafah.
- IDF officials have cited two reasons to explain the concealment: they do not want to volunteer information to Hamas about the current operation's intentions and character; and they, particularly the new chief of staff, want to show the Israeli public that they act first and talk later. In his maiden address about a month and a half ago, Zamir told the painful truth to Herzi Halevi and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu at the transition ceremony that was held in the small auditorium of the air force's offices in the Kirya in Tel Aviv: "Hamas has not been defeated—and we are facing years of a war of attrition in multiple theaters."

- That was tantamount to declaring, in practice and with little commentary, that Israel had failed to defeat Hamas as either a military or governing force, because of the government's insistence on not forming any alternative to the terrorist group to rule two million Gazans, and even though it's been a year and a half since October 7.
- During last year's ground offensive in Gaza, the IDF delivered daily briefings to the public that sacrificed with its relatives in combat battalions and units that operated in the Gaza Strip; the military allowed reporters to interview them in Palestinian territory on nearly a weekly basis, bringing their voices and faces into Israeli families' homes.
- Nowadays it's forbidden to even show the faces of soldiers and officers up to the rank of brigadier general out of concern that they will run into trouble overseas for violating international law.
- Then-IDF spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari also faced the cameras often, describing failures and successes, achievements and challenges, in order to inform the public about the fighting's progress to the extent possible under the limits in terms of information security. Defrin, the new IDF spokesman, has done that on camera once, and the IDF has been settling for laconic statements, once every two days on average, about the troops' activity in the buffer zone on the border or the corridor bisecting Rafah and Khan Yunis.
- The scale of these press releases, their depth and visual detail are similar to the ones from the "lean" rounds of escalation in Gaza in the years that preceded the war. This week something unusual did happen, but it was led and controlled by the Defense Minister's Bureau, when military correspondents were brought to a short briefing with Yisrael Katz on the bisecting corridor, which the political leadership has given the romantic nickname "Morag Corridor," a memory from the past or a hint to the future of the Israeli settlement that was built in the vicinity of this corridor before disengagement.
- This policy of ambiguity is also very convenient for the political leadership on the Netanyahu-Katz axis: the current ground operation has been portrayed mistakenly in some of the media's news editions as a resumption of the offensive against Hamas, or as a resumption of the fighting with all Israel's might. That way, members of right-wing circles can relax on the sofa and think that the IDF is once again breaking the terrorist group's bones, Ben Gvir can rejoin the cabinet on this basis, and Smotrich can stop threatening to leave.
- Incidentally, both of them probably know the truth, and they might even be privy to it: With a decisive contribution from Israeli policy, Hamas is

still an asset in the Gaza Strip to be distinguished from the Palestinian Authority.

- This dramatization therefore misses reality, to put it mildly, certainly when one of the divisions currently operating in Gaza includes barely a brigade and a half, a relatively small brigade-level combat team—about a quarter of the average scale of a division in the ground offensive at the start of last year.
- IDF officials have admitted that the objective of the current action in Gaza is relatively modest: Pressuring Hamas to release more hostages in another round, and perhaps to compromise on a deal to include more Israeli demands, such as demilitarizing the Gaza Strip and exiling the terrorist group's leaders.
- “There have barely been any encounters in the current action because it's limited and partial, and also because most Hamas terrorists have abandoned Rafah and fled to the displaced persons' cities in the area of Khan Yunis,” said an officer in the sector. “We're keeping up the hunt from the air for operatives and terrorists, and we're also trying to find Hamas commanders. This also creates movement and pressure on the terrorist group, but it cannot and is not intended to crush it.”

Yediot Ahronot

Bitter Herbs

By Nahum Barnea

- The door to the West Wing of the White House opened for US President Donald Trump. He went out into the courtyard. He wore a dark business suit, a red tie, a white shirt.
- The door of the armored car opened. Out came the prime minister of Israel, Binyamin Netanyahu. He wore a dark business suit, a red tie, a white shirt. Trump saw himself facing Trump: the same suit, the same tie, the same shirt, a half-head shorter. Like Danny DeVito and Arnold Schwarzenegger in Twins; like two women wearing the same dress to a wedding. He didn't like what he saw. Are you trying to out-Trump me, he wanted to say to Netanyahu, but restrained himself. He let out his anger at him later, in front of the hearth in the Oval Office.
- Netanyahu received a level 6 attitude on the Zelensky scale: on the same yellow sofa, with the same forced pose, rebuked, silent, on the edge of his seat, like the Turkish ambassador in his meeting with Danny Ayalon.

- **When President Obama landed in Israel in March 2013, Netanyahu welcomed him in the identical suit, the identical shirt, the identical blue tie. When Obama removed his jacket and placed it on his shoulder, Netanyahu removed his jacket and placed it on his shoulder. Like Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta in Pulp Fiction, if you will. Presidents do not like it when doubles breathe down their neck.**
- **Obama later said that when Netanyahu talked to him, he wasn't sure which of them was the US president and which of them was the prime minister of Israel.**
- **I don't know what Trump promised Netanyahu, if he promised, on the matter of Iran; I don't know what the promises of a president who is guided by his whims are worth. But the event in Washington can teach us the price the prime minister is paying for placing all his eggs in one basket.**
- **A conventional US president would realize that the prime minister has to come home with something: if not making an exception for Israel [on the tariffs], then at least the appointment of a team to review the numbers; if not agreement on a military course of action against Iran, then at least a joint statement ahead of the talks; if not removing Turkey from Syria, then at least agreement on dividing the areas of influence. The Israeli prime minister also has voters who need to be pleased.**
- **But Trump, with malice disguised as generosity, chose to mention to Netanyahu that Israel receives four billion dollars in aid a year from America (it receives less, but the facts don't matter to Trump). Congratulations to you, Trump said in the same bitter, sarcastic tone in which the envious congratulate those who've won the grand lottery prize.**
- **Instead of reining in Erdogan, Trump is embracing him; instead of deterring Iran, he is courting it. In the phone call that he held with Netanyahu while the latter was in Budapest, he did not trouble to tell him that he was starting talks with Iran. Netanyahu heard of this only from the envoy Witkoff after arriving in Washington.**
- **For Trump, foreign leaders are also positions of trust. Think of the irony: Netanyahu, who wants to turn all the top positions in Israel into positions of trust, discovers in Washington that he serves in a position of trust for the US president, with no High Court of Justice to protect him. That is his role, that his is job: obey or leave. Trump uses Israel's military might to reach a deal with Turkey and with Iran, but Israel is of no interest to him. It is just a means.**
- **Netanyahu is goal-oriented. The goal is to prevent Iran from having nuclear weapons. As he sees it, that can be done by means of an**

airstrike, with American participation or backing; it can be done by means of an agreement whose conditions will be dictated by Israel. Trump is the key: without him, nothing will happen. That explains his obsequiousness. But there is so much obsequiousness all around that Netanyahu's compliments are heard with indifference.

- **In the video that he made sure to film and circulate after the meeting, Netanyahu posed conditions for the agreement: Iran must blow up its nuclear program just as Libyan leader Qaddafi dismantled his in 2003 due to his fear of an American attack. That is a good demand, but not realistic: dismantling his nuclear program was a tragic mistake for Qaddafi. The threat of nuclear weapons could have saved him and his regime when it was destroyed in 2011. The Iranian regime learned the lesson. It will do everything that it can to remain a nuclear threshold state.**
- **The comparison that Netanyahu made to Libya was meant to feed Iranian fears, to sabotage the negotiations.**
- **Steve Witkoff, Trump's loyal associate, is supposed to run three separate and crucial negotiations in parallel: the release of the hostages and ending the war in Gaza; ending the war between Russia and Ukraine; dismantling the Iranian nuclear program. Witkoff is a successful, energetic real estate man with no diplomatic experience.**
- **Even Kissinger would find it difficult to take on these three tasks simultaneously. Witkoff will have to prioritize. The hostages' release is the first task that will be dropped. Netanyahu will not oppose that, he is focused on Iran.**
- **He is betting on the negotiations derailing and on an American strike. Will that happen? Very unlikely. Will a strike eliminate the nuclear threat? Even more unlikely. But if that does happen, Netanyahu will be able to tell his voters: I made history. I attacked Iran, I normalized relations with Saudi Arabia, I saved Israel, I changed the face of the Middle East.**
- **And then, only then, says someone who is close to someone who is very close, will he make a plea bargain agreement and announce that he is retiring from public life; quitting at the top, admired and beloved by all. Will that happen? That is extremely unlikely, the mother of all unlikeliness.**