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Israel and Middle East News Update

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AI-Monitor

Jordan foils 'sabotage' plot involving rockets and drones, 16 arrested

Jordanian authorities announced on Tuesday that they detained 16 people in connection with a Lebanon-linked “sabotage” plot that included manufacturing drones and rockets. The General Intelligence Department said it had “foiled plans aimed at targeting national security, sowing chaos and sabotage within Jordan.” A total of 16 individuals were detained after being monitored since 2021, the official news agency Petra cited the department as saying. The plans, authorities said, relate to manufacturing rockets and drones, possession of explosives and firearms and recruiting operatives in Jordan and abroad, Petra reported.

Times of Israel

In swift reversal, Witkoff says any nuclear deal must ‘eliminate’ Iran’s enrichment, weaponization

White House special envoy Steve Witkoff said Tuesday that any agreement on Iran’s rogue nuclear weapons program would require the Islamic Republic to “stop and eliminate its nuclear enrichment and weaponization program.” It was an about-face for Witkoff, who had indicated a day earlier, contrary to Israel’s position, that Washington would be satisfied with a cap on Iranian nuclear enrichment and would not require the dismantling of its nuclear facilities.

Times of Israel

Iran insists military capabilities and proxy groups are 'red lines' in talks with US

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps said Tuesday the country's military capabilities were off limits, ahead of a second round of talks with the United States on its nuclear program. "National security and defense and military power are among the red lines of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which cannot be discussed or negotiated under any circumstances," Guards spokesman Ali Mohammad Naini said, quoted by state broadcaster IRIB.

Times of Israel

Hamas said to reject Israeli proposal that it disarm as part of 6-week ceasefire

Hamas has turned down an Israeli offer for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip under which the terror group would have been required to disarm, according to a Tuesday report. According to the BBC, Israel is demanding the release of half of the remaining living hostages in exchange for a six-week truce and Hamas's disarmament. "The Israeli proposal relayed to the movement through Egypt explicitly called for the disarmament of Hamas without any Israeli commitment to end the war or withdraw from Gaza. Hamas therefore rejected the offer in its entirety," an official in the terror group was quoted as saying.

Reuters

Hamas armed wing says it lost contact with group holding Israeli-US hostage Alexander

The armed wing of Hamas said on Tuesday it had lost contact with a group of militants holding Israeli-American hostage Edan Alexander in the Gaza Strip. Abu Ubaida, the armed wing's spokesperson, said on the Telegram that it lost contact

after the Israeli army attacked the place where the militants were holding Alexander, who is a New Jersey native and a 21-year-old soldier in the Israeli army.

Haaretz

France Advancing Mideast Deal to End Gaza War, Seal Israel-Saudi Normalization

French President Emmanuel Macron said after speaking with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday that he hopes a decision will be made "in the coming hours" to resume the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza and to secure the release of additional hostages. Haaretz has learned that Macron's remarks came amid significant efforts to advance the broadest possible cease-fire deal as soon as possible. These efforts include French pressure for a swift renewal of the cease-fire and a push to advance normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia. This is part of a French-Saudi initiative to advance a two-state solution and an international conference in New York on the issue that both countries are expected to lead in June.

Arutz Sheva

Revealed: Information leak almost prevented Operation Arnon

In its statement, the Shin Bet clarified that, "A Shin Bet operative has disclosed classified information that nearly compromised Operation Arnon — a mission during which four hostages, Noa Argamani, Shlomi Ziv, Andrey Kozlov, and Almog Meir Jan, were successfully rescued." The Shin Bet stated that, "as part of the investigation, a Shin Bet (ISA) agent was suspected of taking advantage of his security role and his direct access to its classified information systems, to take

this information and transfer it to unauthorized parties, on a number of occasions and in a confidential manner."

Ynet News

US approves major weapons shipment to Israel as IDF prepares for Gaza offensive, eyes Iran

The IDF is set to receive a major arms shipment from the United States in the coming weeks, including more than 3,000 munitions for the Israeli Air Force, as part of its preparations for continued operations in the Gaza Strip and a potential strike on Iran, Israeli officials said Monday. The shipment, recently approved by the U.S. administration, is intended to boost the Air Force's readiness for a large-scale campaign planned by the IDF Southern Command in the Gaza Strip. The delivery comes in addition to more than 10,000 aerial munitions expected to replenish Israeli stockpiles after 18 months of prolonged, multi-front fighting.

Reuters

US military poised to slash troops in Syria, officials say

The U.S. military is set to consolidate its presence in Syria over the coming weeks and months, two U.S. officials told Reuters on Tuesday, in a move that could reduce the number of troops it has in the country by half. The U.S. military has about 2,000 U.S. troops in Syria across a number of bases, mostly in the northeast. The troops are working with local forces to prevent a resurgence of Islamic State, which in 2014 seized large swathes of Iraq and Syria but was later pushed back.

Commentary:

Yediot Ahronot

Do Not Kill the Mocking Bird

By Ari Shavit

- It might not happen. Donald Trump truly might close a deal with Khamenei, and Steve Witkoff might close a deal with Hamas, and next year will be a quiet year. Saudi Arabia might join the Abraham Accords and Lebanon might enter into a peace process and the future might brim with peace.
- But our working assumption should be otherwise. After what happened on October 7, 2023, we have to prepare for the worst. We have to realize that within a few months, high-intensity fighting might be resumed in the Gaza Strip. We have to know that we might find ourselves in a direct conflagration with Iran within a year.
- We have to prepare for war. Israel is not prepared for war. The IDF has been doing its part: it is arming, equipping and planning. The new US administration is restocking the Israeli warehouses. But the government is one in which half the public has no confidence.
- The security establishment is an establishment that half of the people does not trust. Israeli society is torn, its politics are appalling and the mood is depressed. As the fight about the attorney general and the GSS director prove—we are on the brink. In the spring of 2025, Israel does not have a credible national leadership that is leading a nation that is united and resolute ahead of a major war.
- In this historic and challenging context, there is one man who holds our fate in his hands: Eyal Zamir. The 24th chief of staff faces a task that no chief of staff has ever had to face in the past half-century. He needs to mend the flawed organizational culture that led the army to the debacle. He needs to instill in the IDF a new spirit and a new ethos that is commensurate with the new existential threat. He needs to refresh the tension, the excellence and the operational discipline. He needs to increase the military buildup and he needs to improve the troops.
- Zamir needs to adopt an apt security doctrine, a pertinent use of troops and a comprehensive strategy. He needs to run the IDF as a powerful, fighting state entity that defends a divided society and a dysfunctional state.
- But there are some people who wish to trip up Zamir even in his first few months. After the new chief of staff fired the IDF spokesperson and refused to accept the politicization of the air force, he lost his appeal for

many of the veteran Israeli elites. A circle of bitterness, skepticism and judgement is even now closing in on him.

- Their stated suspicion is that he is doing the prime minister's bidding. But the unstated suspicion is that that tough soldier from the Armored Corps, a native of Eilat, is not one of our own. After growing accustomed to seeing the IDF's top brass made up of officers who are identified with Oslo, disengagement and the peace process—suddenly the IDF is headed by an officer of a different sort.
- An officer who is liable to cause the IDF to no longer be the IDF of Tzahala [Tel Aviv neighborhood whose name is derived from Tzahal, which is how the IDF is pronounced in Hebrew, where many veterans live]. An officer who will adapt the army's face to the face of changing Israeli society. An officer who is not focused on instilling liberal values but on building a war machine that will strike the enemy forcefully.
- Harper Lee's book, *To Kill a Mocking Bird* [the Hebrew word for mocking bird is zamir], was first published 55 years ago. It told the story of a decent-minded and courageous lawyer, Atticus Finch, who fought against the prejudice and racism that poisoned a town in the southern United States. Nothing is identical to anything else.
- But there are similarities between the attempt to silence Finch because of his integrity and the attempt to attack Zamir because of his professionalism and practical approach. Our town is also a sick town, afflicted with poisonous tribalism. That is the reason that the political media establishment in Israel has found it hard to accept a non-tribal and non-PR minded lieutenant-general whose agenda is clean, national and stately.
- The prevailing assumption is that if he isn't one of us, he must be one of them. A deserter; a rival; a threat to the good guys.
- Do not kill the mocking bird [Zamir]. We can ask questions, review and criticize—but we must not trip Zamir up because he is all-Israeli. The new chief of staff is the right man in the right job at the right time. He has spoken plainly to the political leadership as well. But most important of all: the challenge that he and we face is a challenge on a 1948 scale.
- Therefore, what we must do now is to let Eyal Zamir do what he is doing: work hard, and prepare Israel for an existential war.

Yediot Ahronot

It's Time for the Chief of Staff to Issue Draft Orders to Haredim

By Noam Tibon

- **The outcry raised by the IDF chief of staff about the crisis of combat soldiers is genuine and needs to be met with immediate action. The Israeli government has already made it clear in every way possible that it has no intention of drafting Haredim and, even worse, it intends to entrench their dodging of the draft through formal legislation. Under those circumstances, there is only one way to prevent the IDF from being shattered—draft notices need to be issued to all 18-year-old Haredim.**
- **Few people believed that a year and a half after October 7, and in the wake of a bloody war in which Israel sacrificed the best of its sons and daughters, we would still have to argue about the IDF draft. But if there is one issue that the Israeli government has been very clear about, it is the draft.**
- **It is clear to the government that it does not intend to draft the Haredim, and it has no intention of taking the military's needs into account. Even worse, it is actively acting to enshrine mass draft-dodging in Israeli law.**
- **The defense minister has been trying to whitewash this industry of draft dodging with empty words, such as “target draft numbers” and “protecting the world of Torah.” He described the most basic and essential act of issuing draft orders in keeping with the law as “unilateral [draft] orders.”**
- **He went on to describe the criticism of the government's abandonment of the IDF conscripts and reservists as “attempts to batter and divide.” It is important that we not lose our way among all those slogans and that we focus exclusively on the government's actions.**
- **With its one hand, it is advancing a military draft bill that will destroy the IDF; with its other, it has continued to send emergency call-up orders repeatedly to the very same people who have already sacrificed so much and are nearing the end of their rope.**
- **It is also plainly evident that the IDF has given up, and has begun to improvise. In an effort to reduce the intolerable burden borne by the combat troops, it has tried to place soldiers with lower military physical profiles in combat service, to establish platoons of “short-term NCOs” and to maximize the option of drafting women to serve in combat**

positions. All of the above, naturally, are only partial solutions that fail to address the root problem in any meaningful way.

- The facts and figures illustrate the scope of the crisis. On October 7 the IDF was lacking three divisions it needed to fight simultaneously on two fronts, and the war took a painful toll: more than 800 soldiers were killed and more than 12,000 others were wounded, including high-ranking commanders.
- According to the director of the IDF Personnel Directorate, the IDF needs at the very least 10,000 more combat troops to begin to fill the ranks. Current demographic trends guarantee that the situation will only grow worse with every passing year.
- The number of prospective Haredi conscripts at present accounts for more than 20% of all 18-year-old men, and will come to account for roughly 35% of all 18-year-old men within a decade.
- The conscription rate among national-religious, secular and Druze Israelis stands at 85%, which means that Haredi teenagers are the only potential pool of conscripts that the IDF can draw from.
- Since the government is determined not to help the IDF solve its personnel crisis in its combat units, the IDF needs to act and to do. The IDF needs to issue draft orders to all prospective conscripts, in keeping with the current law, and it also needs to enforce personal sanctions against draft-dodgers.
- That is the only way the Haredim will enlist, and they will be excellent soldiers. It is imperative to disprove the myth as if “we tried, but it didn’t work.” The assertions about the 10,000 draft orders that were issued are misleading. The only draft orders that were issued were preliminary orders for classification, and most of them were “targeted”—to wit, they were issued mainly to Haredim who are members of the workforce and to older Haredi men who are married with children and are therefore ill-suited to serve in combat capacities.
- Drafting them is very costly for the IDF, and that also serves the scam as if a real attempt has been made to draft the Haredim.
- The IDF has not yet issued the number of draft orders it was authorized to issue. Consequently, it has not yet come near to the low target draft numbers that it set for itself (4,800). The grim result is that only 205 Haredim have been conscripted in practice, according to data that were presented to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee.
- The chief of staff has waved to the government a glaring red flag to warn about the impending collapse. In order to meet the IDF’s needs, the director of the Personnel Directorate needs to issue real draft orders as

early as tomorrow to all 14,000 prospective Haredim recruits between the ages of 17.5 and 18.5, before it's too late.

- **Every passing day further erodes the motivation to serve. The percentage of reservists who reported for duty early on the war stood at 120%. Those numbers have now dropped to less than 50%. That is no coincidence. The reservists who served hundreds of days this year have seen the government abandon them to their fate, and they have also seen the IDF fail to do the bare minimum of issuing draft orders to everyone. That is a crucial task that the incoming IDF chief of staff needs to perform.**
- **Lt. Gen. Eyal Zamir is an esteemed commander who has given years of his life to the country. He was handed a military that was tired after a year and a half of fighting, a military facing a real crisis of confidence among its field commanders, and a military that has been given a slew of difficult tasks to perform in seven separate theaters of operations.**
- **If he hopes to succeed and to usher the IDF to recovery, Zamir is going to have to shoulder the historic task that will set the IDF's course in the years ahead: A genuine universal draft of all 18-year-old men, including Haredi men, or the destruction of the IDF's reserve army and forsaking Israel's security.**
- **This is neither a political question nor an ethical question; this is a question of Israel's security and existential needs. Chief of Staff Zamir was right to say upon the assumption of his duties, "Our actions will speak." The time has come to take action.**