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Israel and Middle East News Update

Monday, April 28

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Reuters

Palestinian leader Abbas names likely successor in bid to reassure world powers

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas named close confidant Hussein al-Sheikh as his deputy and likely successor on Saturday, the Palestine Liberation Organisation said, a step widely seen as needed to assuage international doubts over Palestinian leadership. Abbas, 89, has headed the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and the Palestinian Authority (PA) since the death of veteran leader Yasser Arafat in 2004 but he had for years resisted internal reforms including the naming of a successor.

Times of Israel

IDF strikes Hezbollah missile warehouse in Beirut, kills operative in south Lebanon

The Israeli military struck what it said was a Hezbollah precision missiles warehouse in Beirut's southern suburbs on Sunday, after killing one of the Iran-backed terror group's operatives in a drone strike in southern Lebanon earlier in the day. There were no immediate reports of casualties in the Beirut-area strike, which came after after the military warned residents to evacuate. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Israel Katz said in a joint statement that missiles stored in the Lebanese capital "posed a significant threat to Israel."

Ynet News

Druze families reunite across borders as Israel allows religious visit from Syria

Hundreds of Druze families reunited in Israel this week after years of separation, as Israel allowed approximately 650 religious figures from Syria to enter for the annual Nabi Shu'ayb festival. The visitors were granted access to the shrine of Nabi Shu'ayb, the most sacred site for Druze, located in the village of Hittin above the Sea of Galilee. The rare event enabled long-divided families from Israel and Syria to meet and celebrate together.

Times of Israel

Netanyahu: Israel stopped Iranian planes from reaching Syria ahead of Assad's ouster

Israeli warplanes last year intercepted Iranian aircraft headed toward Syria, preventing them from delivering troops meant to assist the country's embattled president at the time, Bashar al-Assad, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Sunday. The remarks in a speech gave a new glimpse into Israel's thinking in the final days in power for Assad, a longtime enemy who was overthrown by Islamist-led insurgents last December.

Ynet News

Iran accuses Israel of orchestrating port explosion as death toll rises to 36

Firefighting efforts continued Sunday at Iran's Shahid Rajaee Port in the southern city of Bandar Abbas, following a massive explosion that took place there on Saturday. Fire crews were seen deploying planes and helicopters to drop water from above. Iranian Interior Minister Eskandar Momeni said 80% of the fire had been contained but estimated it would take several more hours to fully

extinguish. However, new container explosions around midday caused the flames to intensify again.

Times of Israel

Trump says Iran talks going ‘very well,’ as PM warns bad deal ‘is worse than no deal’

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called on Sunday for Iran’s entire nuclear infrastructure to be dismantled, as talks between the US and Iran were said to be moving in a positive direction following the third round of indirect negotiations in Oman over the weekend. The negotiations, aimed at sealing a deal blocking Tehran from acquiring a nuclear weapon but also lifting crippling economic sanctions imposed by Washington, are expected to continue to a fourth round in the coming days.

Reuters

Hamas open to long Gaza truce but not to disarming, an official says

Hamas is open to a years-long truce with Israel in Gaza but is not willing to lay down its arms, an official said on Saturday, as leaders of the Palestinian Islamist militant group met mediators in Cairo for ceasefire talks. Sources close to the talks told Reuters Hamas hoped to build support among mediators for its offer, adding the group might agree to a five to seven-year truce in return for ending the war, allowing for the rebuilding of Gaza, the freeing of Palestinians jailed by Israel and the release of all hostages.

Reuters

Gaza ceasefire talks make some progress, Qatari PM says

Qatar's prime minister said on Sunday that efforts to reach a new ceasefire in Gaza have made some progress but an agreement between Israel and Hamas to end the war remains elusive. "We have seen on Thursday a bit of progress compared to other meetings yet we need to find an answer for the ultimate question: how to end this war. That's the key point of the entire negotiations," said Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, who also serves as foreign minister.

Commentary:

Israel Hayom

Mediators' Proposal: Release 10 Hostages, Permanent Ceasefire, Committee to Administer Gaza Strip

By Shahar Kleiman

- The mediators are expected to present a new proposal to Israel and the Hamas terrorist organization this weekend. They say the proposal aims to strike a balance between the [demands of] both sides.
- The new proposal was drafted by Egypt in coordination with Qatar and the United States. The mediators aim to reach a comprehensive agreement to include a hostage deal and a long-term ceasefire, expected to last five to seven years and backed by international guarantees.
- According to a draft of the proposal published by Saudi magazine Al Majalla, on the third day of the ceasefire negotiations would begin under the mediators' auspices regarding necessary arrangements for a permanent ceasefire. These would include: the number of terrorists to be released in exchange for the remaining hostages, IDF redeployment,

demilitarization of the Gaza Strip, arrangements for postwar governance, and the official declaration of a permanent ceasefire.

- Saudi news outlet Asharq reported that Hamas is willing to discuss the weapons issue and supports a five-year ceasefire, though no further details were provided. On the one hand, this indicates a certain development in the talks, since senior Hamas officials have publicly rejected “any discussion on the weapons issue.”
- On the other hand, Hamas’s terms have not been detailed. Senior Hamas officials had previously stated that any discussion of disarmament would only be possible within the context of a process leading toward establishing a Palestinian state.
- Egypt is expected to summon all Palestinian factions soon in efforts to bridge the Hamas-Fatah divide once again. The committee to govern Gaza, which Egypt proposed in recent months, is reportedly expected to consist of 15 independent figures and technocrats who are unaffiliated with any specific faction. This committee would be granted full executive authority to manage Gaza’s day-to-day affairs, while “ensuring neutrality” and monitoring Gaza’s Egyptian-led reconstruction plan.
- This invitation to the Palestinian factions comes at a particularly tense moment in relations between the two organizations. During a Fatah Central Committee meeting, Abu Mazen called on Hamas to release the hostages and even called Hamas leaders, “sons of dogs.” Hamas officials furiously responded, demanding Abu Mazen issue a public apology.
- Meanwhile, senior Palestinian official Ahmed Majdalani said he believed Hussein Al-Sheikh would be the most likely candidate to be appointed PLO deputy chairman, following this week’s meeting of the Palestinian Central Committee. Al-Sheikh already serves as secretary-general of the PLO’s Executive Committee and is widely regarded as the leading contender to eventually succeed Abu Mazen.

Maariv

The Cost of a Kilogram of Flour

By Jacky Hugi

- There would be no flour left in Gaza in two weeks’ time. This is what an acquaintance in Gaza told me. He despises Hamas and would be happy if they disappeared off the face of the Earth. Despite his patience and polite

conversation, facts of life are hard to conceal. The IDF destroyed his home and forced him to go to Rafah. Until October 7, he was living on a low monthly wage of NIS 2,000. Life was hard, but he got by. He now finds it hard to even buy flour—which is very hard to come by in Gaza.

- It is even harder to scramble together the amount of money you need to buy it. Did you know that if you make coffee over burning wood, it tastes different than when you make it over gas? I haven't tried. This is what he told me.
- There is hardly any gas in Gaza. It is not that easy to get your hands on water either. His home in Gaza City was partially damaged and has no electricity. He stayed anyway, despite the IDF ordering the neighborhood's residents to, once again, move south. Our friend is a Fatah man and receives just over NIS 1,000 from the Palestinian Authority each month, a third of which goes into banking fees. This is a 30% commission.
- Everyone screws over everyone else in Gaza. Israelis screw over the Palestinians, and the Palestinians screw over their own brothers. This is a war of survival.
- I asked him to write more. He said that the shops still have canned goods, which came in on trucks during the ceasefire. They're running out though, and prices are sky-high. Canned meat, which used to go for just two shekels, now costs 13. A can of fava beans, ordinarily one shekel, is now eight. A liter of oil will cost you NIS 50 and a kilo of sugar, which used to cost seven shekels, now costs NIS 50.
- Vegetables are scarce since terrorists have been operating in the agricultural areas and digging tunnels there, and the IDF attacks have harmed the crops. One kilo of cucumbers or tomatoes will cost NIS 18. There are no potatoes to be found, and eggplant costs NIS 28 per kilo.
- Pharmacy shelves are empty, and the sick search high and low for medication. A single cigarette can cost NIS 100. Lighters, too, a rare commodity that can cost NIS 50. Just six months ago, the price was just 50 agorot.
- "Most of the population has no money and doesn't buy these products," our friend in Gaza told us. "They make do with cheaper food like pasta. There are also donor-funded soup kitchens that cook for the general public, serving lentil soup or bean stews. They're jam-packed."
- It has been two months since the border crossings were closed and food or basic commodities stopped entering Gaza. Hamas warehouses do still have a certain quantity of basic commodities—but they are not sharing it

- with the public. Our friend thinks that “in two weeks’ time,” they won’t be able to buy anything. Prices will increase even more, as will shortages.
- If this is true, Abu Mazen’s juicy cursing of Hamas as he reappeared for the cameras make sense: This week in Ramallah, he called them “sons of dogs,” and advised them to release the hostages and put an end to the war.
 - After Israel, Abu Mazen is Hamas’s greatest abuser. In the years preceding October 7, he slashed budgets transferred to Gaza, vehemently rejecting reconciliation. A few short days after the massacre, he was quick to condemn Hamas. Throughout the war, he has also been critical of Israel and its scale of killing and destruction in Gaza—but this is what is expected of him.
 - What is less expected is his refusal to offer Hamas the help it so desperately needs—even now when they are bleeding from Israel, lying prostrate at its feet.
 - Israel’s government is indeed the main obstacle to a solution in Gaza, but it’s certainly helped along by Ramallah. For its own PA-Hamas relations reasons, Ramallah has rejected any arrangement that would allow Hamas to bear arms. That same speech demanded Hamas lay down their guns and become a political party.
 - Refusing to obey orders, Hamas threw a spanner in the works of the Egyptian proposal. Cairo is striving to set up a joint Hamas-PA Palestinian government.
 - Israeli new outlets were quick to quote Abu Mazen this week cursing Hamas and demanding they turn themselves into a political party. Nothing can better heal our own war, the war of the Jews, like the Arabs fighting among themselves.
 - Hamas was unperturbed: Senior Hamas official Bassem Naim sarcastically remarked that something looked off. Time and time again, Abu Mazen blames the Palestinian public for the deaths of so many. The message was clear: stop collaborating with the Israelis.
 - In less reported parts of his speech, Abu Mazen’s said things that sound unpleasant to Israelis: One third of residential homes in Gaza have been damaged one way or another. There have been 18,000 children and teenagers, along with 12,000 women, killed in Gaza. The IDF told residents of Jenin’s refugee camps to leave, meaning 21,000 people left their homes.
 - Hamas’s leadership and its military wing now face their harshest hour since their inception 38 years ago. They are hardly fighting, pulverized by Israeli fire, hated by the Arab governments and humiliated by the PA.

Fury on the Arab street is not what it used to be either. Traditional donors from the movement in Turkey, the Persian Gulf states and East Asia face difficulties transferring money with Gaza in its current situation. This is all compounded by incessant IDF attacks with dozens daily reported killed.

- Some are indeed terrorists. Civilians, however, also find themselves caught in the crosshairs. Without a resurgence, the Hamas leadership is gleefully holding on to the hostages as a prized treasure. This is the only card they have left to play to save themselves. Together with Egypt and Qatar, the Hamasniks have drafted a new proposal for Israel.**
- A five-year hudna in exchange for the release of all the hostages. The war will stop, and the initial process of rebuilding the Gaza Strip will commence. Jerusalem snorted with derision. Five years in which it will rebuild the military capability it lost during the war.**
- The heavy military pressure is meant to decisively vanquish Hamas and break its spirit. Let's say it works out well sometime—don't count on it but meanwhile, it's the hostages who pay the price. If not their bodies, then their broken minds, which have been repeatedly scarred. We thought that apathy had a bottom, and here come these times to tell us that there's a double bottom.**
- A year and a half after they were forcibly taken into the Gaza Strip and experienced atrocious sights, instead of coming home, our hostages have become unclaimed goods.**
- Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich admitted the open secret this week, that the Israeli hostages are not the cabinet's primary objective. US President Donald Trump, who worked to secure the release of their friends three months ago, is not the right person to talk to for the time being. The negotiations have frozen, and there is no sign they will resume in full force anytime soon.**
- Apathy has also been revealed on the other side of the fence. Inside the Gaza Strip, no one cares about the suffering of the population. Two million civilians there have been abandoned to their fate every day, soon they might even be starving for bread.**
- My acquaintance has long since stopped asking where the international community is and where all the knights of justice are. He's busy looking for a bag of flour. And a cigarette.**