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Israel and Middle East News Update

Tuesday, April 29

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Reuters

Israel's Shin Bet chief announces resignation, to step down June 15

The head of Israel's domestic intelligence service announced his resignation on Monday, saying he would step down on June 15, six weeks after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu tried to oust him. "After 35 years of service, in order to allow for an orderly process of appointing a permanent successor and a professional handover, I will end my role on June 15, 2025," Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar said in remarks released by the security service.

Times of Israel

Mahmoud Abbas's newly anointed deputy to make first diplomatic visit to Saudi Arabia

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas's newly appointed deputy, Hussein al-Sheikh, will make his first diplomatic trip to Saudi Arabia next week, an Arab official and a Palestinian official told The Times of Israel on Monday. Al-Sheikh's choice of Saudi Arabia demonstrates a recognition of the key role Riyadh can play in the PA's effort to return to relevance on the international stage, where it has been overshadowed by Hamas after the terror group's October 7, 2023, attack on Israel and the ensuing war in Gaza.

Times of Israel

In first since Trump's return, PA intel chief to meet CIA officials in Washington

The Palestinian Authority's intelligence chief Majed Faraj is slated to meet with CIA counterparts in Washington this week for the first time since Donald Trump returned to the White House, a US official and a Palestinian official told The Times of Israel. Contact between the Trump administration and Ramallah has been limited, but the US has maintained some of its funding for the PA's security forces, despite a near-complete freeze on foreign assistance, the US official said.

Reuters

Israel's Gaza aid blockade contested in World Court hearings

U.N. and Palestinian representatives at the International Court of Justice accused Israel of breaking international law by refusing to let aid into Gaza, on the first day of hearings about Israel's obligations to facilitate aid deliveries. Since March 2, Israel has completely cut off all supplies to the 2.3 million residents of the Gaza Strip, and food stockpiled during a ceasefire at the start of the year has all but run out.

Ynet News

Israeli defense officials preparing to expand Gaza operation, major reserve call-up

Israel is preparing to expand its military operation in Gaza and significantly increase its call-up of reservists, a defense official said Monday. Due to the deadlock in hostage deal negotiations, Israeli leadership has decided to act on previous threats and escalate fighting. Senior ministers have pushed for immediate approval of expanded IDF action in Gaza, but the decision was delayed due to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Israel Katz's desire to exhaust diplomatic channels to reach a hostage deal before proceeding.

Reuters

Gaza ceasefire talks in Cairo near 'significant breakthrough,' two security sources say

Negotiations held in Cairo to reach a ceasefire in Gaza were on the verge of a "significant breakthrough," two Egyptian security sources told Reuters on Monday. There was no immediate comment from Israel and Hamas. Axios reporter Barak Ravid said in a brief post on X that an Israeli official denied the reported breakthrough, without giving further details.

i24 News

Syria says won't join Abraham Accords as 'Israel is occupying' territory

After Syria expressed interest in joining the Abraham Accords to US lawmakers last week, the Syrian channel Syria TV reported Sunday night that the Syrian government had written a letter to the US refused to join other country in normalizing relations with Israel, claiming that Israel is occupying its lands. Sources told the Syrian channel that the government noted that the Abraham Accords are with "countries whose lands Israel does not occupy, and therefore Syria cannot be a part of them."

Times of Israel

Iran's interior minister blames 'negligence' for port blast, as death toll hits 46

Iran's Interior Minister Eskandar Momeni said Monday that a deadly explosion at the country's largest commercial port two days earlier was caused by "negligence" and failure to comply with safety measures, as state television, citing local officials, said the death toll had risen to 46. "Some culprits have been

identified and summoned... There were shortcomings, including noncompliance with safety precautions and negligence in terms of passive defense,” Momeni told state TV, adding that the materials should have been dispersed.

Commentary:

Maariv

Israel’s “American Credit isn’t Unlimited”

By Anna Barsky

- In the wake of US President Donald Trump’s comments about increasing the flow of food and medicine into the Gaza Strip, Israeli officials said: “President Trump’s rhetoric wasn’t surprising; we expected this. While it’s true that the Americans are with us, we don’t have unlimited credit with them.”
- They went on to say: “The White House hears what Western leaders are saying about the humanitarian situation in Gaza, and they also see the pictures in the media. There is an understanding in Israel that, ultimately, we will have to allow humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. The political leadership isn’t discussing the question of aid to Gaza, yes or no, but about how to distribute it so that it doesn’t fall into Hamas’s hands.”
- The emerging plan, as reported first by Ma’ariv, is to establish wholesale distribution compounds in the southern Gaza Strip, and have a number of private foreign companies distribute the aid to the civilian population.
- The IDF will be involved in providing security, but not in distributing the aid itself. The foreign companies will be hired by a third country, not by Israel. Israeli officials believe that the establishment of aid distribution compounds might encourage the civilian population to move southward even before their concentrated evacuation in the context of intensified military actions in the Gaza Strip.
- Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani condemned Israel at a joint press conference with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan in the wake of anti-Qatari messages from Israel. Al Thani also commented to the issue of the talks for a ceasefire deal after holding two important meetings in the last few days.

- Al Thani visited Washington last week and met with Trump, Marco Rubio and senior officials. They discussed the hostages and reaching a ceasefire agreement in Gaza. Israeli and American officials believe that Qatari officials in general, and the Qatari prime minister specifically, have extensive influence over Hamas. That is also the reason that Mossad Director David Barnea visited Qatar, for the first time since the last hostage deal was signed on January 17.
- The second important meeting that the Qatari prime minister held was with Mossad Director Barnea in Doha last Thursday. Israeli officials revealed that senior Qatari officials persuaded Hamas not to move forward with the Egyptian plan, which is similar to the Witkoff plan, arguing that “there is a chance of going back and advancing the proposal made by Adam Boehler for a truce for a number of years in exchange for ending the war.” Israel blasted Qatar and said that its stance had prompted Hamas to back down following the progress that had been made in the negotiations for a partial deal. [...]

Israel Hayom

Trump Has Met Israel's Expectations

By Ariel Kahana

- There are many things that Donald Trump loves and many things that he hates. Israel, fortunately for us, lies deeply inside the first group.
- In any event, the first 100 days of his second term in office have reflected the direct continuation of the positions that defined the [first Trump administration] between 2017 and 2021.
- Now, like then, Trump has stood absolutely with Israel: his unyielding war against antisemitism on American campuses; the endless supply of defensive and offensive weapons; the full freedom of action for the IDF in Lebanon, Syria and Judea and Samaria; and the provision of automatic and absolute support for Israel in the event of any international criticism.
- In case anyone has forgotten, things were completely different through January 19, 2025. While it may be true that arms shipments were sent by Biden to Israel, but the pace was far slower. More generally, the Biden administration helped Israel with its right hand, but interfered with its left hand, as Mike Herzog, the former Israeli ambassador to Washington, described it.

- The logistical supplies that Secretary of State Blinken forced us to allow into Gaza enriched Hamas, prolonged the war and delayed the hostages' release. The IDF's freedom to act was restricted by the Americans time and again. And administration officials were at the forefront of international criticism of Israel, including with false smears about "starvation in Gaza."
- All that happened while Biden the Zionist was in office. Had his vice president, Kamala Harris, been elected, who knows where we would be today.
- All of which mean that substantively Trump is 100% with Israel. If anything has changed, it's the rhetoric. The president's remarks about Israel have become somewhat more distanced, apparently as a result of political calculations. His view is that the value of Israel's stock in American public opinion has diminished; Israel, which used to be in consensus, has become a controversial issue. In a bid to refrain from antagonizing pro Palestinian Americans who voted for him, the president has refrained from explicitly saying where his heart is.
- A second reason for his rhetorical caution is the isolationist faction within the MAGA movement. That group, whose most prominent spokesperson is Tucker Carlson, believes that America should simply disengage from global problems and focus on its own affairs. They believe that Israel—a belief that is often peppered with antisemitic arguments—is a big problem.
- Trump has close ties with Carlson and his ilk, and he is probably acting cautiously in an effort to avoid pushing things to the brink. Nevertheless and this is what is most important—contrary to theories that have been presented from time to time, the isolationists haven't seized control of the second Trump administration and they aren't the ones who are setting the tone.
- Trump's sons, Eric and Don, who have close ties with the isolationists, have exempted Israel from the aspiration to reduce American expenditure and troop deployments across the world.
- Just last week Dan Caldwell, a deputy to Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, was fired from the Pentagon. Caldwell spoke out strongly against a war with Iran prior to his appointment. He said that he was fired due to his opposition to a plan that was advanced by the Pentagon to produce regime change in Iran, opposition that he said stemmed from his belief that doing so might lead to war. Caldwell rushed to present his version in a pampering interview with Tucker Carlson, who has also obsessively preached against a war of that kind. In other words, a

prominent pro isolationist advocate was ousted from the administration, indicating that the isolationists aren't the ones dictating policy.

- So who is dictating policy? The answer, obviously, is Trump. The president, who has made mutually contradictory statements about Iran, is the person who will ultimately decide whether to sign a nuclear agreement, on the assumption that one can be achieved by Steve Witkoff, or should a military operation be ordered. Currently, it seems that he is contending with his own competing impulses for and against.
- On the one hand, Trump promised the voters that he would end wars—and a military operation in Iran might start a new regional war. On the other hand, based on what he told several people in recent days, he hasn't any illusions about the Iranian regime that, as we all recall, tried to assassinate him.
- In the meantime, Trump has continued to flex his muscles on a scale that is nowhere near anything that we have ever seen before. There is no doubt that the aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf, the bombers in Diego Garcia, the huge planes that have landed in the [IAF] Nevatim airbase and his public statements that bombing Iran's nuclear facilities is a real option, have all made it clear to the Iranians that he is completely serious.
- That is the reason why the Iranians tucked their tail between their legs and crawled their way into negotiations of a kind that they had staunchly refused to hold with the Biden administration for four years. Further amplifying their humiliation, Trump forced the Iranian foreign minister to meet directly with Witkoff, in a break from the regime's longstanding ideology.
- Even though many Israelis are concerned about what is being discussed in the negotiating room, the recent developments are precisely what Israel dreamed about for years—dreams that for years hadn't come true. For near two decades Israel has been telling the various American administrations that only a "credible military threat" will prompt the Iranians to become flexible. This is the first time that a threat of that kind has been made. It is true that we are still in the early stages of the talks, but Iran has already made several concessions.
- If an agreement is reached, Israel might not like it, but in terms of the stance taken in principle, Trump is fully aligned with Netanyahu on this issue as well.
- In his first 100 days in his second term in office, Trump has delivered everything that Israel had expected he would. If we add to that calculation

the past four years, we probably won't be disappointed moving forward either.