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Israel and Middle East News Update

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i24 News

Saudi media: Gaza ceasefire proposal for hostage release in May gains momentum

Despite official Israeli denials regarding a breakthrough in the negotiations held in Cairo for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, several major outlets on Tuesday suggest significant progress in the talks. According to sources from the Saudi Al Arabiya and Al Hadath, a preliminary agreement has been reached for the release of several hostages held in Gaza during the month of May, among whom would be an American citizen. These sources also confirm the continuation of meetings between Egyptian officials and representatives of Hamas and Israel in the coming days.

Times of Israel

Israeli official: Reports of breakthrough in hostage-ceasefire talks 'inaccurate'

An Israeli official on Tuesday pushed back on “inaccurate” overnight reports that there had been a breakthrough in Gaza ceasefire-hostage release talks with American, Egyptian and Qatari mediators in Cairo, as Arabic media indicated there was a preliminary deal to release some captives as soon as May. “Israel is working tirelessly with the Americans and the mediators with the goal of advancing a deal to free our hostages, but as of now, no agreement has been reached,” said the Israeli official, reiterating comments carried on Hebrew media Sunday night by Israeli officials, also unnamed, denying reports of a breakthrough.

Al-Monitor

US sanctions China-Iran network aiding Tehran missile program

The Trump administration announced sanctions Tuesday on what it described as a network procuring ballistic missile propellant ingredients for Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. According to a Treasury Department news release, the six Iran- and China-based companies coordinated the shipment of dioctyl sebacate and sodium perchlorate, the latter of which is a precursor chemical for ammonium perchlorate. The chemicals are key ingredients in solid propellant rocket motors, which are commonly used for ballistic missiles.

Times of Israel

US plans to eliminate security post tasked with bolstering Israel-PA security ties

The US State Department is planning to eliminate the office of the US Security Coordinator (USSC) in Jerusalem, which helps bolster security coordination between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, a Trump administration official, congressional aide and third source familiar with the matter told The Times of Israel on Tuesday. The cut is part of a broader reorganization of the State Department that Secretary of State Marco Rubio is advancing, which will see the shuttering of dozens of offices around the globe, the sources said. The move was first reported by the Axios news site.

Reuters

Syria's foreign minister met State Dept officials in New York, sources say

Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shibani met with senior U.S. State Department officials on Tuesday in New York, two sources familiar with the matter said, as

Damascus seeks a clear road map from Washington on how to secure permanent sanctions relief. Shibani has been in the United States for meetings at the United Nations, where he raised the three-star flag of Syria's uprising as the official Syrian flag 14 years after the country's civil war erupted. Syria's long-time oppressive ruler, Bashar al-Assad, was ousted by a lightning rebel offensive in December.

Reuters

More than a dozen killed in sectarian clashes near Syrian capital

More than a dozen people were killed in a predominantly Druze town near the Syrian capital on Tuesday in clashes sparked by a purported recording of a Druze man cursing the Prophet Mohammad which angered Sunni gunmen, rescuers and security sources said. The fighting marked the latest episode of deadly sectarian violence in Syria, where fears among minorities have been swelling since Islamist-led rebels ousted former leader Bashar al-Assad from power in December, installing their own government and security forces.

Commentary:

N12.co.il

Six Things That Should be Done Against Hamas Immediately

By Meir Ben-Shabbat

- US President Donald Trump, who repeatedly threatened that all “hell” would break loose in the Gaza Strip if the hostages were not released, recently confirmed while speaking with journalists that he pressed Prime

Minister Binyamin Netanyahu in their conversation last week to allow humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip.

- **Trump is scheduled to visit Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar in mid-May. Presumably, he will be told about the difficulties [those countries face] in capitalizing on the regional opportunities amid the ongoing fighting that has failed to produce a decisive outcome.**
- **Despite his very sympathetic stance towards Israel, it is hard to know how that will impact the line of credit that he has given Israel to deal with Gaza. For that reason, though not only for it, the Israeli political leadership should clearly set a timeframe for exhausting the efforts to reach an agreement on a hostage deal without a high-intensity military operation.**
- **Furthermore, even within the current scope of its efforts against Hamas, Israel has levers of pressure that would allow it to ratchet up the pressure on Hamas and to degrade its capabilities by using measures that for a range of reasons have not been used to date.**
- **1) Killing Hamas leaders overseas: It isn't clear why Israel has allowed the heads of the snake to continue unhindered to oversee Hamas's political, information and media efforts. It is Hamas's leadership overseas that has conferred to the organization its status as an influential regional movement, instead of being viewed as a "local problem."**
- **2) Attacking Hamas's stockpiles of fuel and food: There isn't any reason to wait for those stockpiles to be depleted on their own. Attacking them will shorten Hamas endurance.**
- **3) Imposing a full naval blockade: A blockade of that kind would also strictly prohibit fishing boats from leaving the ports in Gaza to fish at sea (according to a UN report, fishermen have encountered difficulties, but fishing is still being allowed).**
- **4) Shutting down the internet and disrupting Hamas's communications: The internet and other Hamas means of communication serve its effort to remain abreast of the situation on the ground and to maintain its hold on power by means of instructions it issues to the public, as well as propaganda.**
- **5) Preventing smuggling into the Gaza Strip: Israeli media outlets have reported on the use of drones to smuggle contraband (including arms) from the Sinai Peninsula into the Negev, and from there into Gaza. Israel must take stern action in response, including arresting the Israelis who are involved so as to put an end to the smuggling operations.**
- **6) Expanding options for Leaving Gaza: Gazans who wish to leave the Strip for third countries should be given more options for doing so in**

order to help implement Trump's initiative, which has been a source of great concern for Hamas.

Israel Hayom

Ronen Bar to Step Down on June 15

By Lilach Shoval

- More than a year and a half after the greatest failure in the history of the General Security Service under his leadership, Ronen Bar announced yesterday he would step down as of June 15.
- Although Bar accepted responsibility in the aftermath of the October 7 attack, he did not follow through on that by resigning.
- “As the person who stood at the head of the organization, I took responsibility. Now, on an evening that symbolizes remembrance, heroism and sacrifice, I have chosen to announce that I will follow through and have decided to step down as director of the General Security Service,” Bar said.
- Speaking at a memorial ceremony for GSS members who were killed in the line of duty, Bar added, “My love for the homeland and my loyalty to the country are the basis over every decision I have made in my professional life. That remains true tonight.”
- Speaking about the events of October 7, Bar said, “After [spending] years on multiple fronts, the sky fell on one night, on the southern front. The entire system collapsed. The GSS failed too [in that it] failed to provide a warning.”
- He tried to shield the members of the organization. “To the families of the murdered and the fallen, it is important for you to know that the GSS did not make light of the threat. Despite attempts to manufacture a different reality, the GSS was never complacent; to the contrary: there was understanding of the Hamas threat, alongside constant initiative and a drive to engage [the enemy]. Nevertheless, we failed.”
- The GSS director also sent a clear message to other top defense officials: “Given the magnitude of the event, all of us who have chosen public service and protecting the security of this country as our life's mission— and who failed to provide a security blanket that day—must bow our heads in humility before the murdered, the dead, the wounded, the kidnapped and the families, and act accordingly. Everyone.”

- Bar called for a state commission of inquiry to be formed. “The truth and the corrections that must be made can be done only within the framework of a state commission of inquiry. You deserve the truth. The fallen deserve it. Taking responsibility in practice is an inseparable part of [setting a] personal example and the legacy of our leaders, and we have no legitimacy to lead without it.”
- In his speech, Bar also addressed the legal battle over his dismissal: “This is an organization whose proper functioning is of priceless importance to the security of the country and to Israeli democracy. I have been fighting for this for the past month, and this week the necessary groundwork was laid before the High Court of Justice.”
- He stressed that “clarification is needed regarding the institutional protections that will allow any [future] GSS director to do his job independently and free from pressure. That will draw a clear line to distinguish between trust and loyalty.”
- With his retirement, Bar will end 35 years of service, which arrived discordantly after he was fired last month by the cabinet but he chose to remain in office pending the High Court of Justice ruling on the matter. His decision to step down may make a High Court of Justice ruling moot, and efforts might still be made to reach a compromise on an agreed-upon date for his resignation earlier than the one he announced.
- Bar’s resignation at this moment in time is good for Israel’s security, as extreme tension between the government and its primary intelligence agency has hampered the ability to hold substantive discussions on security issues. Now, the central question is who will be appointed to head the GSS, and whether the prime minister will succeed in appointing an agreed-upon and consensus candidate, as he did with the appointment Eyal Zamir as IDF chief of staff.