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## **Israel and Middle East News Update**

***Wednesday, May 14***

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- **US envoys, headed to Doha for truce-hostage talks, tell families they're optimistic**
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Reuters

## [US agrees to sell Saudi Arabia \\$142 billion arms package](#)

The United States agreed on Tuesday to sell Saudi Arabia an arms package worth nearly \$142 billion, according to a White House fact sheet that called it "the largest defense cooperation agreement" Washington has ever done. The agreement, signed during U.S. President Donald Trump's visit to the Saudi capital Riyadh, covers deals with more than a dozen U.S. defense companies in areas including air and missile defense, air force and space advancement, maritime security and communications, the fact sheet said.

Reuters

## [Trump to remove US sanctions on Syria in major policy shift](#)

President Donald Trump said on Tuesday he would order the lifting of sanctions on Syria at the behest of Saudi Arabia's crown prince, a major U.S. policy shift ahead of an expected meeting with Syria's Islamist President Ahmed al-Sharaa. Trump is set to say hello to Sharaa on Wednesday in Saudi Arabia, a White House official said, setting up an encounter between the president and the former al Qaeda commander who took power after Bashar al-Assad was toppled. Two Syrian presidential sources told Reuters they would meet on Wednesday morning.

Times of Israel

## [Visiting Riyadh, Trump tells Saudi Arabia: You'll join Abraham Accords in your own time](#)

US President Donald Trump said Tuesday that it is his “dream” for Saudi Arabia to join the Abraham Accords, before acknowledging that Riyadh will do so in its own time. “It’s my fervent hope, wish and even my dream that Saudi Arabia... will soon be joining the Abraham Accords,” Trump said in a foreign policy speech at an investment summit in Riyadh on the first day of his Middle East visit. “But you’ll do it in your own time,” Trump subsequently added, seeming to acknowledge that Riyadh is not currently prepared to normalize relations, given the ongoing war in Gaza and the current Israeli government’s refusal to establish a pathway to a future Palestinian state.

## Jerusalem Post

### [IDF attempts to assassinate Hamas leader](#)

### [Mohammed Sinwar in Gaza hospital, sources tell](#)

### ['Post'](#)

The IDF on Tuesday attempted to assassinate Hamas leader Mohammed Sinwar in a strike on the European Hospital in Khan Yunis in Gaza, sources told The Jerusalem Post. The military may have used a bunker buster bomb in their attempted attack against Sinwar, defense sources told the Post. Following the initial attack, the IDF reportedly struck the area where Sinwar was allegedly located a second time, with the objective of preventing the evacuation of casualties, Israeli public broadcaster KAN reported.

## Times of Israel

### [US envoys, headed to Doha for truce-hostage talks, tell families they’re optimistic](#)

US special envoy Steve Witkoff and US hostage envoy Adam Boehler on Tuesday told families of hostages still in Gaza that they think there is a chance to make progress on freeing their loved ones as they head to Qatar for indirect talks

between Israel and Hamas, the Hostage and Missing Families Forum said. The Forum said that during a two-hour meeting, Witkoff “expressed that everyone would prefer to see a diplomatic solution, noting that most captivity survivors have been released through diplomatic means.”

## **Jerusalem Post**

### **Israeli defense officials warn of 'widespread starvation' risk in Gaza - NYT**

Some IDF officials have "privately concluded that Palestinians in Gaza face widespread starvation unless aid deliveries are restored within weeks," the New York Times reported on Tuesday. The US news outlet's report was based on communicating with three Israeli defense officials "familiar with conditions in the enclave," who spoke on condition of anonymity. IDF officers monitoring humanitarian conditions in Gaza warned their commanders that many areas in the enclave will run out of enough food to "meet minimum daily nutritional needs," the NYT claimed.

## **i24 News**

### **Iran expresses willingness to temporary restrict uranium enrichment**

Iran is ready to accept temporary limitations on its uranium enrichment, the Iranian deputy foreign minister said on Tuesday, adding that negotiations with the United States have not yet addressed these specific aspects. "For a limited period, we can accept a series of restrictions on the level and volume of enrichment," said Majid Takht-Ravanchi, according to remarks reported by the Tasnim news agency. "We have not yet addressed the details regarding the level and volume of enrichment," he added.

## **Trump halted Houthi operation over lack of results - report**

US President Donald Trump agreed to a ceasefire with the Houthis last week because the operation failed to achieve its goals, according to a report in the New York Times Monday. Trump surprised the world when he announced an end to the war against the Houthis without providing a significant reason for it, besides saying that they "capitulated." Despite this, the new report suggests that the victory claimed by Trump actually cost more than he was willing to spend, with more than \$1 billion in the month of escalating operations against the Iran-backed group. Trump expected more significant results in a short period of time and the enemy's determination combined with the high costs led him to retreat.

**Commentary:**

**Yediot Ahronot**

## **Worsening Ties: Egypt Won't Appoint Ambassador to Israel**

**By Smadar Peri**

- An official from the Egyptian Foreign Ministry told Yedioth Ahronoth yesterday that Cairo has decided not to appoint a new ambassador in Tel Aviv after Israel declared its intention to expand the fighting against Hamas in the Gaza Strip as part of Operation Gideon's Chariots. He also said Egypt has decided not to accept the letter of credence from Israeli Ambassador to Egypt Uri Rothman, whom the government appointed some time ago and is actually still in Israel. Cairo's latest ambassador in Israel, Khaled Azmi, finished his tenure about a year ago—after it was extended for a year longer than planned—and has since returned to Egypt.

- Meanwhile, Egyptian diplomats have continued to work at the Egyptian embassy on Basel Street in Tel Aviv, albeit without an ambassador. It is believed that Dr. Tarek Dahroug, who served in various senior capacities in the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, was to be appointed the next ambassador. [...]
- The Egyptian Foreign Ministry classifies the job of Egyptian ambassador to Israel as a “highly sensitive task,” and Egypt’s president and Egyptian intelligence have to approve the candidate, similar to Egypt’s ambassadors to the United States and to Saudi Arabia.
- Either way, the deteriorating relations between Cairo and Jerusalem have also taken the form of Egypt’s decision to decline to accept Uri Rothman, whom Israel appointed as its next ambassador to Cairo five months ago.
- In practice, Egypt accepted a request to approve Rothman’s appointment as the new ambassador in April 2024, but it chose to slow-walk the process in light of the war in the Gaza Strip and the negative public opinion that could have accompanied the move.
- The protocol with ambassadorial appointments is for the appointing country to ask the host country to approve the appointee. A country can, for its own reasons, refuse to approve one ambassador or another for various reasons, and in many cases the way to kill an appointment is not by officially rejecting them, but by not giving an answer for a long time and by sending messages through diplomatic channels. Hence, in practice, Rothman’s transfer to Cairo has been held up and he has not yet gone to Egypt.

**Yediot Ahronot**

## **Israel’s Man in Ramallah?**

**By Michael Milshtein**

- No one in Ramallah raised an eyebrow following the announced decision roughly two weeks ago that Hussein al-Sheikh (Abu Jihad) had been selected to serve as vice chairman of the PLO Executive Committee, a position whose practical significance means he is Abu Mazen’s deputy.
- For more than a decade, al-Sheikh’s name has been floated in the market of prominent candidates to succeed the rais, and he and Commander of the Palestinian General Intelligence Service Maj. Gen. Majed Faraj (Abu Bashar) are members of the limited circle of connected people with

whom the Palestinian Authority chairman consults, and who control most activity in it.

- His personal story is reflective of the generation that led the first Intifada. He was born in Ramallah in 1960 and grew up in the reality of Israeli occupation while deeply familiarizing himself with Israeli society and learning fluent Hebrew, primarily during the twelve years he spent in prison.
- Like many leaders of the generation of 1987, al-Sheikh came from the refugee sector (his ancestry can be traced to the village of Dayr Tarif, which was adjacent to Lod until 1948), and he viewed political activity as a vector of mobility. He grew as a commander in Tanzim (the field operatives of Fatah) and joined the Preventive Security Force early in the history of the PA, but stepped down quickly after a conflict with commander Jibril Rajoub that has lasted to this day.
- His fortunes improved as a result of two intertwined processes: first, rebuilding the PA following the second Intifada, which was accompanied by developing stable ties with Israel, and improving the fabric of life in Judea and Samaria; and second, the rise of Abu Mazen, who was and still is his political godfather.
- A prominent sign that he had begun training to be his successor came in 2022, when he was appointed secretary general of the PLO Executive Committee and received the negotiations portfolio that Saeb Erekat had held until his death.
- Aside from his close relationship with Abu Mazen, al-Sheikh draws his power primarily from external sources, above all from his close ties with Israel, which have been developing since his 2007 appointment as minister of civic affairs, a job that has within its purview ties with Israel in all spheres.
- In that framework, al-Sheikh has maintained everyday ties with top Israeli defense officials and politicians (except the current cabinet, which is averse to contact with senior PA officials, and definitely so in public), and has abstained from any involvement in terrorism. Additionally, al-Sheikh has close ties with American officials, particularly with high-ranking CIA figures.
- Alongside his sources of power, al-Sheikh also has darker aspects, chiefly a poor public image that is rooted in longstanding allegations of corruption and sexual harassment. One can commonly see on Palestinian social media photographs of his sons and daughters, who won lofty positions in the PA despite their young age, driving luxury cars,

which is juxtaposed with the difficult lives that most Palestinians lead, as well as with the sacrifice and the path of struggle that others pursue.

- In a series of polls that the research institute led by Dr. Khalil Shikaki has conducted since the war began, the rate of support for al-Sheikh for the presidency has oscillated between a “high” of 6% and zero (in the last poll that was published this week).
- Al-Sheikh is one of the richest men in Judea and Samaria, and he owns quarries, gas stations and houses, including a magnificent villa in Jericho. “The entire Palestinian street is familiar with the rumor mill about him, including that he stole tens of millions of dollars that had been earmarked for the reconstruction of Gaza (before the war—MM), took money a scale of tens of millions of shekels by scalping employment permits that he received through his Israeli connections, and paid hush money to the women he sexually harassed and to Abu Mazen for his support against domestic attacks,” said a businessman and a journalist from Ramallah.
- Another weak point is the fact that al-Sheikh does not have a broad camp of supporters in Fatah. On the contrary, he has prominent rivals who have made it clear that they will not necessarily accept him as leader of the PA in the future. They include Marwan Barghouti, who has had a longstanding rivalry with al-Sheikh, one of whose peaks was when the latter beat him in the election for Fatah’s leadership in Judea and Samaria on the eve of the second Intifada (2000), a victory that Yasser Arafat ultimately did not certify.
- In this context, it was alleged that al-Sheikh exploited his ties with Israel to guarantee that the popular Barghouti would not be released from prison, which would have threatened his standing. “Hussein always works for himself and for the occupation, and one of the key tasks that was assigned to him was to take action against Barghouti,” said the senior Fatah official Fahri Barghouti.
- Another weak point is Hamas’s hostile attitude to him. Unlike senior Fatah officials that Hamas has called legitimate figures—such as Jibril Rajoub, whose brother Naif is one of the leaders of the Islamic camp in the West Bank; Barghouti, who promoted measures that would advance reconciliation together with Hamas; and Mohammed Dahlan, the Gazan who has maintained regular contact with Hamas’s leadership—al-Sheikh is perceived as a figure who subscribes to “treasonous” positions: maintaining close ties with Israel and Western officials, opposition to armed struggle (like Abu Mazen) and prioritizing ongoing stability in



Judea and Samaria over turning the region into an arena of struggle, like Gaza.

- **“Al-Sheikh’s appointment stems from outside dictates and reflects the self-serving tendencies of senior PA officials. The Palestinians should be united around the struggle against Israel instead of divvying out jobs,”** read a statement that Hamas issued after he was selected as vice chairman, and its media described him as **“Israel’s man in Ramallah”** or **“the hero of security coordination.”**
- **One pundit, Yasser Iz a-Din, who is affiliated with Hamas, asserted this week: “Al-Sheikh’s authority must not be recognized, and no one is to have contact with him. The instructions to appoint him came from Beit El (the headquarters of the Civil Administration—MM), and he is a servant of Israel who has to display more excellence than any officer in the Civil Administration.”**
- **The Palestinians wonder about the reason and timing for the appointment. Many surmise that it stemmed from heavy behind the scenes American pressure on Abu Mazen to show that he is rejuvenating the corrupt structure of the PA, which hasn’t changed for years elections have not been held in two decades—and has gained a negative public image. If it were only up to the rais, then the 89-year-old leader, who has shown no signs of leaving and is perpetually afraid of internal subversion, would be unlikely to take such a step.**
- **The appointment was made during a time that is replete with threats from the PA’s standpoint: Israel is preparing to conquer the Gaza Strip, which is liable to project on the situation in Judea and Samaria; senior cabinet officials, chiefly Bezalel Smotrich, have made it clear that the PA is an enemy that must be toppled and that territory in the West Bank must be annexed; Hamas has excoriated the administration in Ramallah as a collaborator, and it has tried to incite the street against it; and the public despises it but accepts it as the lesser of two evils, which is preferable to the fate of Gaza.**
- **Everything Israel is facing from the direction of the Palestinian arena is “complex.” Al-Sheikh is not an ideal partner, but he is the lesser of two evils compared to the rest of the alternatives. He probably won’t be a leader who makes historic political decisions that his predecessors avoided, and he won’t deliver salvation for the effective governance of Gaza either. However, al-Sheikh embodies continuity for the relative stability that has characterized the last two decades in Judea and Samaria, and which too many have been quick to demean lately, without understanding that the alternatives are anarchy and a wave of terrorism,**

**Hamas rule or, worst of all, direct [Israeli] control that means the entrenchment of one state between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River.**