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Israel and Middle East News Update

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Times of Israel

Trump said to have told Netanyahu to end Gaza war, attacking Iran off limits for now

In a tense 40-minute phone call with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday, US President Donald Trump told the premier he must permanently end the war in the Gaza Strip, Israeli television reported Tuesday. Trump reportedly told Netanyahu that the so-called “Witkoff framework,” which would pause the war for some 60 days in exchange for about half of the hostages held by Hamas, will not suffice.

Al-Monitor

Amid Gulf pressure, Abbas tells Macron 'Hamas will no longer rule Gaza'

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas condemned Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack on Israel for the first time in a letter to French President Emmanuel Macron, France’s government said Tuesday. The letter also called for Hamas’ demilitarization and the deployment of international forces to Gaza. It drew a sharp rebuke from Hamas and comes ahead of a high-level conference in New York aimed at advancing recognition of a Palestinian state. Abbas’ criticism of Hamas comes as he seeks international backing for the return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza.

In the letter, excerpts of which were obtained by Al-Monitor, Abbas described Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack as "unacceptable and condemnable" and urged the group to "immediately release all hostages and captives."

Ynet News

Netanyahu: 'significant progress' on hostage deal but 'too early to give hope'

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Tuesday afternoon in a video he released that there is "significant progress" regarding the hostages. Netanyahu added: "I think it's too early to give hope, but we are working tirelessly at this time – all the time. I hope we can move forward."

i24 News

Israeli Navy pounds Houthi targets in Yemen after issuing warning to ports

The IDF launched an attack on the Hodeidah port in Yemen, which serves the Houthis, an Israeli source confirmed to i24NEWS on Tuesday, after days of Houthi attacks against Israel. The source added that unlike all other attacks, this time the attack was not carried out by airstrikes but from the sea. After an hour, an official announcement was made through the IDF spokesperson, confirming the source.

Al-Monitor

US believes Syria's Sharaa at risk of assassination, Trump envoy says

President Donald Trump's point person for Syria says the administration is concerned that Syrian leader Ahmed al-Sharaa's efforts to promote inclusive governance and engage with the West could make him a target for assassination

by disaffected militants. “We need to coordinate a protection system around [Sharaa],” Ambassador Tom Barrack told Al-Monitor in an interview. Barrack highlighted the threat posed by splinter factions of the foreign fighters who joined Sharaa in the lightning campaign that toppled former President Bashar al-Assad in early December. As Syria’s new leadership works to integrate these battle-tested fighters into its national army, they are being targeted for recruitment by groups like the Islamic State (ISIS).

Reuters

Britain sanctions Israeli far-right ministers over Gaza comments

Britain and four other nations imposed sanctions on Tuesday on two far-right Israeli cabinet ministers, Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, accusing them of repeatedly inciting violence against Palestinians in the West Bank. Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Norway joined Britain in freezing the assets and imposing travel bans on Israel’s national security minister Ben-Gvir and finance minister Smotrich, both West Bank settlers.

Jerusalem Post

Smotrich orders cancellation of waiver on cooperation with Palestinian banks

Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich instructed the ministry's Director-General Yali Rothenberg to cancel the indemnity provided to correspondent banks in relation to banks operating in the Palestinian Authority, his office confirmed on Tuesday. Until now, Smotrich has occasionally delayed the transfer of funds from time to time, but had not ordered a complete halt.

i24 News

US ambassador says 'no room' for Palestinian state unless changes made

US Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee said that a Palestinian state was no longer a priority for Washington, speaking to Bloomberg on Tuesday. "Unless there are some significant things that happen that change the culture, there's no room for it," he said. These changes will likely not occur "in our lifetime."

Times of Israel

Report: Netanyahu approved major deals between top Israeli defense companies and Qatar

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu approved multimillion-dollar defense deals between Israel's top defense companies and Qatar, according to a Tuesday report from the Walla news outlet. Netanyahu denied the report hours later as "fake news." The unsourced report came days after the publication of documents apparently seized by Israel in Gaza that reportedly show Qatar's intense collaboration with the Palestinian terror group Hamas over the course of several years.

Times of Israel

Most northern evacuees unlikely to return, comptroller says, blaming Netanyahu

Fifty-four percent of the 60,000 residents of northern Israel who were evacuated from communities amid the outbreak of war in 2023 said there is a high chance they won't return, according to a report on Tuesday from State Comptroller Matanyahu Englman that largely blamed the premier. Some 60,000 residents were evacuated from northern towns on the Lebanon border shortly after the Hamas-led October 7, 2023, onslaught in southern Israel, amid fears that

Hezbollah in Lebanon would carry out a similar attack, and increasing rocket fire by the Iran-backed terror group.

Commentary:

Yediot Ahronot

Last-Ditch Efforts to Prevent Knesset from Being Dissolved

By Yuval Karni, Sivan Hilaie and Shilo Fried

- A bill to dissolve the Knesset is scheduled to be put to a plenary vote tomorrow in its preliminary reading. Last night, the Haredi parties informed Prime Minister Netanyahu that they intend to vote in favor of the bill. UTJ officials said that the party's position remains unchanged, and they do not believe that Netanyahu either can or wants to present a new iteration of a military draft bill that they might deem acceptable. Shas said that it would join UTJ [and vote in favor of the bill].
- Several prominent Shas rabbis issued a strongly-worded statement in which they condemned the idea of setting target draft numbers and personal sanctions in legislation. "Even people who do not study Torah should not go to the army," wrote the rabbis.
- Even if the bill to dissolve the Knesset is carried in its preliminary reading tomorrow, Netanyahu will still have a "window of opportunity" to avert early elections and to negotiate legislation that would grant the Haredim an exemption from military service. However, a senior coordination source said yesterday that the talks have reached an "impasse," adding that there was no way to bridge the gaps between the Haredi parties' demands and the bill that is currently being prepared for legislation by Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee Chairman MK Yuli Edelstein.
- Yesterday, Edelstein reiterated his position that personal sanctions would be a central component of the bill, adding that they would be applied immediately after the bill is passed into legislation—and not only a year later, as the Haredi parties have demanded. "If there aren't personal sanctions from the first moment, there won't be a military draft bill," said sources close to Edelstein. Edelstein said that even if he were to agree to ease the sanctions, that revision would be disqualified by the Foreign

Affairs and Defense Committee's legal adviser and the Knesset's legal adviser.

- **Netanyahu is expected to try to persuade the Haredi parties not to vote in favor of the bill to dissolve the Knesset at any price, fearing a “dynamic that will lead to the coalition’s dissolution, even if the coalition parties don’t want that.”**
- **Yesterday, Netanyahu’s aides put out feelers to the Sanzer Rebbe to see whether he might act to revise the Council of Torah Sages’ decision and might instruct his representative in the Knesset, MK Moshe Shimon Roth, to vote against the bill to dissolve the Knesset. Sources in the Sanz Hasidic community responded by saying that the decision made by the Council of Torah Sages was absolutely binding.**
- **The Litvak community’s spiritual leader, Rabbi Moshe Hillel Hirsch, who supported the decision to quit the government, commented last night on the draft exemption negotiations and said, “We are working on that from every direction, the MKs and others, and, God willing, everything will be all right.”**
- **Shas political officials have been eagerly negotiating a solution with the Likud. However, by all signs, the compromises they have discussed are considered by some of the movement’s rabbis to be unacceptable. Rabbi Moshe Zedaka and Rabbi Moshe Maya, both members of Shas’s Council of Torah Sages, passed on a message yesterday to Shas Chairman Aryeh Deri in which they informed him that they were staunchly opposed to any Haredi conscription into the IDF. That position was endorsed by Rabbi Shlomo Mahfud, who is one of Shas’s more prominent rabbis.**
- **Yesterday, Likud MK Avichay Buaron introduced a bill that could exact a high financial price from Naftali Bennett ahead of the next general elections. The bill, if passed into law, would bar anyone from forming a new party unless they first covered the debts incurred by parties they had previously formed and led.**
- **According to the bill, this stipulation will apply to any party whose leader had formerly been the leader of a different party in the seven years prior to its establishment, and if the former party had been found by the state comptroller to have incurred debts as a result of improper management.**
- **The bill would garnish any funds raised by the new party to cover the outstanding debts of the old and defunct party. A state comptroller’s report that was released in February found that two parties that Naftali Bennett had formerly established remain in debt. The Jewish Home owes NIS 3 million, and Yamina owes NIS 17 million.**

- The funds in question were received by the parties as state funding in keeping with the Party Funding Law. Since neither party was ultimately elected to the Knesset, the parties are obliged to reimburse the state the funding they received. Neither party has done that to date.

Israel Hayom

Abu Shabab Might be Unreliable. But Israel Has No

Alternative

By Shachar Kleiman

- In the time since the commotion that erupted last week surrounding the “Popular Forces” militia in Gaza, politicians have been trying to link it to the ISIS terrorist organization.
- Lurking behind the wave of disinformation is a transparent political interest to stir up trouble for the government. Hamas, whose well-oiled propaganda machine went into overdrive, also has an obvious interest in smearing the reputation of this new force.
- To get things straight: The Abu Shabab clan is part of the Tarabin tribe, which is one of the Middle East’s largest Bedouin tribes numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Branches of this tribe reside in the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza and the Negev. The tribe is naturally made up of various groups and branches that do not necessarily act together.
- Over the past two decades, countless tunnels beneath the border city of Rafah were used in the massive Sinai-Gaza smuggling industry. This economic powerhouse churned out more than a billion dollars annually with every imaginable item passing through the tunnels—drugs, weapons, ammunition, vehicles, rockets, food, medicine and more.
- Many Bedouins in northern Sinai, including from the Tarabin tribe, took part in the operation of these smuggling routes. When Egyptian soldiers tried to act against them, they responded quickly. The local ISIS branch, which recruited fighters from Sinai and Gaza, also attacked the Egyptians.
- After taking office, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi declared all out war against terrorism in Sinai and the illegal trade beneath Rafah. Dozens of tunnels were destroyed and Cairo forged an alliance with Bedouin tribes, including the Tarabin tribe.

- The tribal coalition that was formed was headed by a businessman and former criminal named Ibrahim al-Argani, who was also a prominent member of the Tarabin tribe. Together, the tribes and the Egyptian army fought ISIS and, by the way, also began to run several contracting companies. This means that Tarabin tribe members, to which the Abu Shabab clan belongs, both cooperated with and fought against ISIS.
- Given this, any Tarabin-ISIS connection would appear to be tenuous, indirect and unlikely to bear any relevance on the present day—certainly not in terms of ideology.
- In recent days, however, two other names allegedly linked to ISIS have cropped up online: The first is Issam Nabahin, a criminal and ISIS operative who was sentenced to death in Gaza for killing a Hamas policeman. He escaped prison at the start of the war. His name suddenly surfaced as supposedly affiliated with the Abu Shabab militia. There is, however, no documented record of Nabahin wearing militia uniforms, and the allegations about his affiliation were made by Hamas-linked sources, such as the GAZA NOW network.
- The second is Ghassan al-Dheini, whose late brother was said to be a member of ISIS and who took part in the kidnapping of Gilad Shalit. This story also raises questions, and was first spread by Hamas-affiliated actors. Ghassan al-Dheini himself is identified with Fatah, and his brother Walid was killed by Hamas for criticizing the organization.
- True, this new force is made up of shady characters. The Bedouins' activities in Sinai also demonstrate their opportunism: They will work with whoever offers the best deal—for better or worse. Yasser Abu Shabab himself was involved in arms and drug trafficking in the past.
- Broadly speaking, Israel's experience with militias has been complex and has seen several resounding failures. However, Israel has little choice. The alternative to the militia project would be a vacuum. The day the IDF leaves the area, this vacuum will be probably filled by Hamas and allies of the terrorist organization, undoubtedly promoting an ideology similar to that of ISIS.
- Have we not heard on every news talk show how important it is to cultivate an alternative for the day after the war? Well, this is the alternative. And even if the old maxim of "trust but verify" clearly applies in this case, one must honestly say that there are no better alternatives.
- The Palestinian Authority, which cooperates with the clan, refuses to officially enter Gaza as long as the war is ongoing. Presumably, the militia's operations might effectively be laying the groundwork for an eventual entry of the PA into Gaza.

- **If anything, the center-left should have welcomed the move. But Israel is plagued by an absence of any serious discussion about any issue.**