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Israel and Middle East News Update

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AI-Monitor

US to evacuate personnel from Iraq following Iran threats

The United States is evacuating diplomatic personnel from Iraq, a State Department official told AI-Monitor on Wednesday, amid threats from Iran to strike US bases in the region. "President Trump is committed to keeping Americans safe, both at home and abroad. In keeping with that commitment, we are constantly assessing the appropriate personnel posture at all our embassies. Based on our latest analysis, we decided to reduce the footprint of our mission in Iraq," the State Department official said.

Arutz Sheva

Agreements reached: Knesset dissolution bill fails to pass

The bill to dissolve the Knesset was defeated early Thursday morning in a preliminary reading in the Knesset, following agreements reached with the haredim regarding the Draft Law. 61 MKs voted against the proposal, while 53 voted in favor. The agreements were reached after intensive talks with MK Yuli Edelstein. Despite these developments, the opposition announced its intention to bring the bill to a vote in the plenum, even knowing that the haredim were expected to oppose it.

AI-Monitor

As Trump gets 'less confident' about deal, Iran threatens US bases in region

Iran on Wednesday threatened to strike US bases in the region in the event the US-Iran nuclear talks fail or a conflict emerges, as US President Donald Trump appeared to be less optimistic about a potential agreement with Tehran over its nuclear program ahead of planned negotiations this weekend. Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a cabinet session on Wednesday, Iranian Defense Minister Aziz Nasirzadeh said some officials from the opposing side are warning of a potential conflict if no agreement is reached.

Al-Monitor

Hegseth tells Congress ‘indications’ Iran moving toward nuclear weapon

US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth told Senate lawmakers on Wednesday that “there have been plenty of indications” Iran has been “moving their way toward something that would look a lot like a nuclear weapon.” Hegseth made the comment before members of the US Senate Committee on Appropriations during a budget hearing on Wednesday. Pressed by Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) to say whether Iran was pursuing a nuclear weapon, Hegseth and the Pentagon’s top general, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Dan Caine, hedged.

Times of Israel

Bodies of Yair Yaakov, second slain hostage recovered by IDF from Khan Younis

The bodies of two slain Israeli hostages who Hamas-led terrorists abducted on October 7, 2023, were recovered by troops from Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip on Wednesday, the military said in a statement. One of the hostages, Yair Yaakov, was abducted from Kibbutz Nir Oz and murdered by Palestinian Islamic Jihad terrorists during the onslaught, the military said. The second hostage, whose name was set to be permitted for publication at a later time, was

also abducted from Nir Oz and murdered during the onslaught. His family was notified that the body had been recovered.

Reuters

US slams UN conference on Israel-Palestinian issue, warns of consequences

U.S. President Donald Trump's administration is discouraging governments around the world from attending a U.N. conference next week on a possible two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians, according to a U.S. cable seen by Reuters. The diplomatic demarche, sent on Tuesday, says countries that take "anti-Israel actions" following the conference will be viewed as acting in opposition to U.S. foreign policy interests and could face diplomatic consequences from Washington.

Reuters

US House speaker Johnson will travel to Israel June 22

U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson will travel to Israel to address the parliament on June 22, he said on Wednesday. "Our ties run deeper than military partnerships and trade agreements," Johnson said in an emailed statement.

Commentary:

Yediot Ahronot

Israeli Officials: Americans Reported on Hamas Flexibility

By Itamar Eichner and Lihi Gordon

- A week and a half after Hamas effectively rejected the Witkoff outline, Prime Minister Netanyahu said yesterday that “significant progress” has been made in the hostage deal negotiations. In a video that he released, Netanyahu added, “I think that it’s too soon to give hope, but we are acting tirelessly at this time and all the time.”
- The prime minister made his above remarks just days after formal confirmation was given that Hamas’s leader in the Gaza Strip, Muhammad Sinwar, was killed. In his absence, the organization has been left without a senior leader in the Gaza Strip. That has shifted the balance of power to the terrorist organization’s overseas leadership.
- Meanwhile, the mediators have continued to apply pressure behind the scenes in an effort to hammer out a deal. An informed official said that the Americans are optimistic about the prospects of reaching an agreement, saying they have detected a shift in Hamas’s positions and increased flexibility regarding guarantees about the war’s end that it has demanded. That issue has been the main stumbling block until now.
- The mediators have remained engaged in ongoing dialogue with Hamas and Israel in recent weeks, though no breakthrough has been reached so far. The thorniest issue has been the implementation of the Witkoff outline, which Israel accepted and to which Hamas responded by adding conditions of its own.
- In the meantime, Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer and Envoy Witkoff held another round of talks, in the course of which the parties agreed to try to make headway in the talks. Netanyahu’s remarks about “significant progress” notwithstanding, the nature of the “flexibility” that the Americans reported in Hamas’s positions remains unclear. If Witkoff decides to visit the region, that will be a clear sign that he believes that chances are good that the gaps can be bridged. An Israeli official said last night, “We’ve been going over with the mediators various possible versions of the Witkoff outline.” He said that if satisfactory answers are received, Israel might dispatch a negotiating team to Doha or Cairo.
- As noted, Hamas has been left without any senior commanders on the ground in Gaza, and the talks have been held primarily with Khalil al Hayya, a senior Hamas official in Doha who serves as the terrorist organization’s chief negotiator. The Americans have been applying intense pressure behind the scenes, and talks have been ongoing between the terrorist organization and Bishara Bahbah, an American Palestinian businessman who is responsible for the indirect talks between the United States and Hamas.

- The Prime Minister's Bureau issued the following statement yesterday evening: "In light of certain progress in the negotiations, Prime Minister Netanyahu convened a meeting this evening that was attended by the defense minister, Minister Dermer, the chief of staff and members of the negotiating team, with the goal of receiving updates about the outline to free our hostages and to discuss further steps."
- A knowledgeable source said, "There's been progress and positive indications, but a long road lies ahead." Viki Cohen's son, Nimrod, is one of the hostages being held captive in Gaza. She wrote on X yesterday: "If it becomes evident that the 'significant progress' was designed to serve political needs, that will be yet another trampling of our weary souls. I fully hope that this doesn't end with yet another bitter disappointment."
- Idit Ohel's son, Alon, is also being held hostage in Gaza. She responded to Prime Minister Netanyahu's remarks, saying, "The time for talk and statements is over. My soul, [the soul] of the Israeli public, is tired. Our heart is broken. We want our children back home!"

Yedioth Ahronoth

Coordination Between Trump and Netanyahu

Threatens Khamenei; Attack in Iran is Possible, but

Not During Negotiations

By Ron Ben-Yishai

- A high-ranking Israeli security delegation visited Washington two weeks ago. The delegation members promised the Trump administration that Israel would not strike Iran as long as the United States was negotiating a new nuclear agreement with Tehran. Since the negotiations between the US and Iran are still ongoing, there isn't any reason for mounting tension in the Israeli media and public in anticipation of a looming Israeli American or exclusively Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.
- The telephone conversation that was held between President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu the other day, coupled with the special security consult that was held in the Prime Minister's Bureau on Monday evening, may have focused on the Iranian nuclear issue, but they were designed to ratchet up pressure on Iran. The Israel Navy operation yesterday morning in Yemen may also have been designed to serve that same

purpose. This string of events was designed to create a credible threat of an Israeli American military operation ahead of a possible crisis in the talks with the Iranians at the end of this week, in the negotiations being run by the president's special envoy, Steve Witkoff.

- In the background is the proposal for a nuclear agreement that the US presented to Iran. While it is true that this proposal includes the removal of some sanctions, though not all, its key demand is that Tehran stop enriching uranium on Iranian soil. The Iranians have already dismissed that proposal as unacceptable, and said they would present a counterproposal of their own in the coming days. The Iranians failed to meet their own timetable for presenting that counterproposal, which might be reflective of an internal disagreement between "hawks" and moderates within the Iranian regime.**
- The moderates, headed (apparently) by President Masoud Pezeshkian, have demanded that Iran compromise and be forthcoming with the Americans on the issue of uranium enrichment. The hawks are opposed, as reflected in the comments made by Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in a public statement: "Who are you to tell us whether to enrich uranium or not?" he asked in a clear allusion to the American demand.**
- But it seems that the Iranian supreme leader, who will decide on the disagreement between the hawks and the moderates, is being cautious and pragmatic as usual, and that is why he has taken more time for himself and his aides to draft Iran's counterproposal.**
- All of which is to say that people who have heard the roar of IAF jets in the skies over Israel, and have good reason to presume that they are training for a strike on Iran, shouldn't hold their breath. Israel will not act alone until after the Americans announce that the negotiations have collapsed.**
- That was the promise that was made by Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer, Mossad Director David Barnea and National Security Council Director Tzahi Hanegbi, who traveled to Washington two weeks ago to reassure the Americans about Israel's intentions.**
- Israeli officials who spoke with Axios said that they told their American counterparts in Washington that Israel would not surprise the Trump administration with a military strike on Iran. The three Israeli officials told their American counterparts that the Israeli view is that attacking Iran would be illogical if a good diplomatic solution could be found, and that is why Israel intends to give the US a chance to achieve that goal.**

- That is the Israeli position despite the fact that the prevailing sense among Israeli defense officials is that the agreement that the US and Iran ultimately cobble together will not be a good agreement from Israel's vantage point, and will allow Iran to continue to enrich uranium to a low grade for several years longer at least.
- The Israeli pledge not to act as long as the US is negotiating reassured the Americans, who viewed the Israeli attacks on Yemen as IAF practice runs ahead of an independent long-range attack on Iran without first coordinating that with the US. This situation is very convenient for President Trump, since it allows him to use Israel as his "threatening attack dog" should the negotiations ultimately fail.
- That is important for Israel because a strike on Iran obliges it to rely on American military capabilities and assets in the Middle East from at least three aspects. The most important aspect is the defensive aspect. Israeli officials know with certainty that if we attack, and even if the Americans attack Iran without us, Tehran will retaliate with its full arsenal of ballistic missiles, drones and cruise missiles.
- The Iranians have in their arsenal hundreds of ballistic missiles, some of which have maneuvering warheads that are difficult to intercept, as well as thousands of drones and cruise missiles that Israel will have difficulty contending with. Some of those weapons, the ones that successfully penetrate Israeli air defense systems, might potentially cause extensive damage, and not just to Israeli airports, but also to strategic facilities and infrastructure as well as to civilian areas.
- To cope effectively, Israel will need to do what it did twice in 2024, which is to prepare defensively in cooperation with US CENTCOM and the United States' Arab and European allies in the Middle East. It is important to recognize that without partnering with CENTCOM and the Americans' allies, which will have to defend themselves, it will be very difficult to defend Israel from the Iranian retaliation strike, which might last for several days.
- The second aspect is a large-scale attack in Iran, which with a high degree of probability will lead to the fall of the Iranian regime. Israel has a good ability to precisely strike the uranium enrichment facilities in Iran, but it does not have the ability to carry out as large-scale an operation as the Americans have. The facilities in question are located dozens of meters below hard and rocky terrain. Despite the extensive experience Israel has accumulated in attacking targets of that kind, the number of strikes that the IAF and the Israel Navy can generate is limited relative to the number that the Americans are capable of generating.

- The Americans have heavier ground-piercing bombs than the ordnance in Israel's possession, and it also has strategic B-52 bombers and B-2 stealth bombers that are capable of firing dozens of precise weapons to create very extensive damage to Iranian military infrastructure. More importantly, the Americans are capable of maintaining the momentum of an offensive against Iran for several days.
- That is important because no military strike on the Iranian nuclear facilities can truly prevent Iran from repairing its nuclear program and from reaching military nuclear capability within a number of years, even if the attack on it is successful.
- A joint Israeli-American attack might spark a popular uprising and ultimately lead to the fall of the Iranian regime. The fall of that regime will probably rid the world of the Iranian nuclear threat once and for all. In any event, that is the assessment held by intelligence officials in Israel and in other countries in the region, who believe that an attack that neutralizes the Iranian nuclear facilities won't be worth the damage that the Iranian retaliatory attack on them will inflict.
- The third aspect is the rescue and recovery operations and coordination with countries in the region, which CENTCOM can and needs to create on our behalf.
- Given the above, it is clear that Israel needs to coordinate and cooperate with the United States if it wishes to strike Iran. That coordination and cooperation is essential mainly in order to deal with Iran's retaliatory strike, but also to deal with the political fallout in the form of UN condemnations and the threat of sanctions by some countries, which the US will have to help us repel.
- That is the reason that Israel was willing, and even more than willing, to promise the US that it would not attack as long as Witkoff remained engaged in talks with the Iranians, and to receive in return an American promise for military and political coordination and cooperation from CENTCOM and the Trump administration if a decision is ultimately made by Jerusalem and Washington that the time for talk is over, and to allow the planes to take off and the missiles to be fired.
- It is important to bear in mind in this context that President Trump accused Iran a week ago of delaying its decision and of failing to respond to the American proposal. In other words, Trump accused the Iranians of playing for time. In any event, the deadline that the American president set for reaching an agreement is due to arrive next week. Furthermore, the IAEA released a report a few days ago that Iran already has 400 kilograms of 60% enriched uranium, which is enough material to produce

ten atomic bombs, the first one of which will be ready within two-to-three weeks.

- **That report lent a sense of urgency to the American negotiations with Iran, and ratcheted up concerns among members of the Israeli intelligence community and defense establishment that Iran might break out to a nuclear bomb in the near future without advance warning, catching everyone by surprise. That is why the IDF has continued to prepare for a strike on Iran. The navy's attack in Yemen yesterday was also designed to send a clear signal to Iran that Israel has a diverse range of ways to attack it, and is not limited only to its air force. For the time being, as noted, the negotiations with the United States remain ongoing, and the public should not needlessly fret at the present moment.**