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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

October 22, 2021

Jerusalem Post

3 Bedouin Villages to Be Recognized, Receive Infrastructure

Three Bedouin villages are set to be recognized by the government and receive infrastructure, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, Welfare Minister Meir Cohen and Deputy Public Security Minister Yoav Segalovitz announced. Lapid added that the government would pass a national plan to develop Arab society in the coming weeks, including billions of shekels for infrastructure. More towns will be added to the electric grid, added the minister. This is the first time that an Arab faction is sitting in the government and this is a golden opportunity to develop the Negev," said Cohen. "Education, health, the organization of a fight against crime, are all on the agenda of the current government, together with the good leadership that exists in the Negev, Jews and Bedouin together." [Dig Deeper "Negev Homes Built Illegally to Be Connected to Electricity after Lapid Gives in to Ra'Am" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Ynet News

Israel to Approve Construction of 3,000 Housing Units in WB

The planning commission in the civil administration of the West Bank announced it would be approving a plan to construct 3,000 housing units in West Bank settlements and prepare planning for an additional 1,344 units. This is the first-time construction in settlements is to be approved since President Joe Biden took office. The approved construction will be inside existing settlements, across the West Bank. Officials in the settlement movement demanded of the prime minister's office to convene the planning commission to approve the construction after it had failed to meet since last August. Area C, where the construction was approved, makes up 60% of the West Bank. [Dig Deeper "Israel Set to Okay 3,000 New Settlement Homes, 1,300 Palestinian Homes" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

I24 News

Enlistment Law for Ultra-Orthodox Introduced

A bill to increase ultra-Orthodox enlistment into Israel's army was introduced to the Knesset. It calls for drastically lower enlistment rates than a previous version of the bill, and is likely to be advanced after the state budget is passed. Mapped out in the bill are annual targets for the number of ultra-Orthodox men to be enlisted per year beginning in 2021. Rates of enlistment would then increase slowly for the annual cohort of ultra-Orthodox men turning 18-years-old. If, however, enlistment targets are not met, the bill suggests a reduction in the state budget for yeshivas - traditional Jewish education systems - which usually use such money to pay students monthly stipends. When originally introduced in 2018 by Finance Minister Avigdor Liberman, ultra-Orthodox parties United Torah Judaism (UTJ) and Shas indicated that they would not oppose the legislation, but later voiced their disapproval of it. Proposed enlistment target figures are just over 2,000 for the first year, a significant drop of over 4,000 men enlisted put forward in the original bill.

Swedish FM Censures ‘Corruption in Palestine’

Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde criticized alleged corruption in the Palestinian Authority (PA), following a meeting with the PA’s leaders in Ramallah during her recent visit to Israel and the West Bank. Linde expressed hesitation about Swedish economic aid to the Palestinians, saying that widespread corruption was hindering Swedish support. The rare rebuke marked a departure from Sweden’s longstanding backing of the Palestinians. Accusations of nepotism and corruption have long dogged officials in Ramallah and have occasionally sparked scattered protests against the PA. Linde met with PA President Mahmoud Abbas, Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh, and her counterpart Riyadh al-Malki during her quick visit to the area. The Swedish government’s current funding plan allocates around \$180m in development aid to the Palestinians between 2020 and 2024. Sweden has also funded millions in direct budget support to Ramallah through the European Union, the PA’s largest single donor.

Turkey Arrests 15 Agents Suspected of Spying for Israel

Turkish media outlets reported 15 individuals suspected of spying for Israel were arrested as part of a massive operation by local security forces and Turkish police. According to local reports, 200 members of the Turkish security forces took part in the series of raids in which five different alleged espionage cells, each numbering three people, were apprehended. While reports in Turkish media did not reveal which country the alleged spies came from, they did note their Middle Eastern appearance. According to the reports, the agents transferred classified information and documents to the Mossad – Israel’s national intelligence agency. According to the Anadolu news agency, "the network relied on Palestinian and Syrian nationals living in Turkey, who received payments through wire transfers and couriers." The suspects were allegedly spying on senior Hamas officials based in Turkey, as well as on several foreign exchange students. [Dig Deeper “Israel and France Hold Secret Talks to End NSO Spyware Crisis” \(Axios\)](#)

IDF Practicing Potential Strike On Iranian Nuclear Sites

The Israeli Air Force has resumed training for a possible strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. According to Channel 12 news, Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Aviv Kohavi ordered that budgetary funds be set aside for drilling such a scenario, after a two-year hiatus. The network said Kohavi had also ordered that the air force train “intensely” in simulating a strike on Iran’s nuclear program. The orders were reportedly given during a meeting Kohavi held at his office in recent days. The report did not cite a source and there was no comment from military officials. Channel 12 reported that the government planned to allocate NIS 5 billion (\$1.5 billion) for an attack on Iran, with \$620 coming from the 2022 defense budget and the rest coming from the current budget. Defense Minister Benny Gantz defended the government’s requested budget increase for the military, warning that the additional funds are necessary in order to prepare for a potential strike on Iranian nuclear sites. [Dig Deeper “Lieberman: Confrontation with Iran Is Only a Matter of Time” \(I24 News\)](#)

Iran Holds Nationwide Air Force Drill, Latest Armed Exercise

Iran kicked off an annual air force drill across the country, a week after holding another massive exercise in air defense, state TV reported. The report said bombers, jet fighters, and attack and surveillance drones will participate in the drill, using heavy weapons including laser-guided missiles. Footage broadcast showed jet fighters and bombers in flight and at takeoff, including US-made F4s and F5s, as well as the Iranian-made Saegheh. Iran bought the American fighters before Washington banned such sales following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. It also has Russian fighters in service. The broadcast also showed drones and aerial refueling operations. It said 10 Iranian military airbases will participate in the maneuver. Reportedly, Iran has 12 airbases. It came a week after Iran held a two-day annual air defense drill in the country's sprawling central desert, with both the army and the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard taking part. Iran regularly holds such drills and says they assess the troops' combat readiness and demonstrate the nation's military capabilities. The region remains on edge over Iran's escalating nuclear program. Talks in Vienna to revive Tehran's now-tattered 2015 accord with world powers have stalled since June, with no date set for their resumption.

Hochstein: Lebanon-Israel Maritime Talks Need to Be Quick

The US mediator for indirect talks on border demarcation between Lebanon and Israel said on Thursday the negotiations he was hoping to revive should be concluded in a short period if they were to succeed. Amos Hochstein, speaking to Al Hadath TV during a visit to Beirut, said holding the indirect talks last year between the two sides in the presence of the United States and the United Nations was an important milestone but that it remained to be seen whether the right time to resume the talks was now. "Perhaps there should be some shuttle diplomacy first, in order to assess the positions of the parties to identify where there is room for negotiation and then ultimately, to go back to Naqoura and complete the negotiations," he said. Long time foes Lebanon and Israel started negotiations through a US mediator in Oct. 2020 at the UN peacekeeper's base in Lebanon's Naqoura. The maritime border dispute has held up exploration in the potentially gas-rich area but talks have since stalled. Israel already pumps gas from huge offshore fields. Lebanon, which has yet to find commercial gas reserves in its own waters, is desperate for cash from foreign donors amidst a deepening economic meltdown. [Dig Deeper "Israel Considering New Pipeline to Boost Gas Exports to Egypt" \(Reuters\)](#)

My Personal Friends

By Nahum Barnea

- **Outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel visited Israel last week for the last time in office. She met with the president, the prime minister and cabinet ministers, and she visited Yad Vashem. She spoke with former president Reuven Rivlin on the phone. “You understand why I can’t meet you,” she apologized. Rivlin understood: were she to meet with him, she would be hard-pressed to explain why she did not meet with former prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, as well. Merkel and Rivlin were both sad about not meeting each other, but they felt a not-insignificant amount of satisfaction. For years the Israelis have been fed the myth that Israel’s foreign relations are the product of one man’s personal charisma: his perfect English, the global reputation that he accrued, his experience and wisdom.**
- **But then the United States elected Joe Biden as president, who declined to invite Netanyahu to Washington even though they have been personal friends for 40 years. The prime minister of Israel was knocking on the door, and the door was shut. It opened only after a new Israeli prime minister was elected. And the German chancellor, Netanyahu’s personal friend of 20 years, visited Israel and declined to meet the opposition chairman. These events are indicative of the limits of the turn of phrase, “my personal friend,” when discussing international relations. More importantly, they demonstrate that it is the State of Israel, its strength, and its vitality are the magnets that draw leaders and countries towards it—not Bibi, Naftali or Yair. Everything else is just PR. It seems that Netanyahu is beginning to realize that. He changed direction in his most recent speeches: not me, Netanyahu, king of the world, but me against the world. Bennett, he mockingly says, is incapable of telling the Americans no.**
- **I did tell them no (he would rather gloss over the question of what came of that). Bennett is scheduled to arrive in Sochi today for his first meeting with Putin. Two hours have been scheduled for that meeting. They will talk a lot about Syria, Iran, and the shared fate with the Jewish people. They might also talk about the Red Army’s performance during World War II, a topic about which both of them claim to be very well-versed. Like Bennett’s meetings with Biden and Sisi, the joint photo-op will be especially significant. The message that will emerge from it is that the handover of the Prime Minister’s Bureau has not detracted from Israel’s standing in the world. Miri Regev can keep calling Netanyahu “prime minister.” Biden, Putin, and Merkel address Bennett that way.**

No Margin for Error

By Sima Kadmon

- **Despite the way it seemed this week, it's still too early for the members of the opposition to try on their election-season suits. Even Netanyahu understands this. Yesterday he admitted it could take "two weeks or three-and-a-half years" for the Likud to return to power, The ones who are adapting less adroitly to the situation are the rank-and-file Likud members, who just two days ago burst into song for Netanyahu's birthday, singing "Happy Birthday, Prime Minister." In contrast, senior coalition officials tend to agree on the second date that the former prime minister set. They believe the budget is going to pass, and to avoid any last-minute surprises they plan on moving the vote up to November 4, about a week ahead of the deadline. That will leave enough time to check out the [voting] trends of the MKs.**
- **If an MK shows a level of independence that jeopardizes the coalition, a senior official told me, we'll dismiss them from the [Knesset under the so-called] Norwegian law. The prime minister met this week with a group of freshmen MKs, who are still unaccustomed to crises. Like young couples who think that every little tiff looks like a prelude to divorce, they treat every disagreement or argument inside the coalition as a disturbing incident. Bennett calmed them down, telling them about the 48-hour law. Even if you have an incident that seems like it's the most dramatic story in the world, in 48 hours no one will remember it. It seems to me that Bennett was referring to an incident involving MK Shirly Pinto, who wrote something inappropriate on Twitter accusing Netanyahu of incitement ("he was and always be an inciter") and quickly deleted it, but that didn't spare her a deluge of vicious responses from Netanyahu's supporters.**
- **I wonder if that belongs to the same category as the incident that happened on Wednesday in the Knesset, when Miri Regev called MK and former deputy director of the Mossad Ram Ben Barak (Yesh Atid) an "Israel-hater." There are things that have been said in the legislature that will best be remembered in eternal disgrace, like this incident. This time Regev, who has already crossed many lines, crossed it even from the standpoint of the opposition. But not all crises manage to disappear in a couple of days. The release of a draft law that is meant to prevent someone under indictment from forming a government reawakened the demons in the coalition.**
- **Ayelet Shaked could scarcely understand why it was necessary: this bill was left out of the coalition agreement because Yamina objected, and this government did not come to fulfill the fantasies of the left wing after all, so why is this being raised now at all? To Shaked's credit, it should be said that she always opposed the bill on the grounds that the attorney general should not decide who will be prime minister. She has a principled stance on the matter. Besides that, she thinks that [the coalition] has to stop focusing on Bibi, and when you have disputes emerging within the coalition, you have to put them aside. But the question has nothing to do with Shaked, who is not an MK and whose finger [i.e. vote] will not decide anything.**

- The question is Bennett. The coalition agreement states that anything related to basic laws requires the consent of all of the factions. As it looks now, no one really knows what Bennett will decide about the bill that Saar considers one of the primary reasons why the government was formed. A poll by Channel Twelve found that 63% of the public supports the bill, which strengthened the justice minister's position that this is a balanced bill. He says that it's a mistake to say [it would give the] attorney general [the power to] decide who the prime minister will be. This bill does not give anyone the right to oust a sitting prime minister; it prevents someone under criminal indictment from forming a government. Nevertheless, neither Saar nor even Shaked knows what Bennett will do. The interior minister has promised a debate amongst Yamina faction members, and Bennett has admitted that he has still not formed a position on this matter or other volatile issues.
- Everything will end up on his desk, the party chairpersons will meet, they will map out the topics and give every party an achievement that they find urgent, and everyone will have to bite their tongues a little. Either way, Saar didn't surprise Bennett by releasing the draft legislation. He kept him apprised at every stage. New Hope understands that Yamina has a problem with endorsing the bill. First of all because of its traditional outlook regarding the balance of power between the State Attorney's Office and the echelon of elected officials, as well as because of the fear of angering the party's voter base, which still regards Netanyahu positively.
- Yamina was criticized when it joined the government; voting in favor of this bill will further anger the kippa-wearing public, which [members of Yamina] have still not lost hope of regaining, whether as a party or individually. Some coalition members recall that Bennett opposed this bill, as did Saar and Elkin. A few weeks before the fourth election Elkin met with Netanyahu and explained in detail all of the circumstances [why] we should not hold yet another round of elections: Covid, Gantz, and the to-be-formed government that he would have a hard time managing. Netanyahu was quiet, and then said: so who will appoint the state attorney? Elkin says that's why he changed his mind and now supports "It isn't an anti-Netanyahu bill," Elkin says. "His chances of returning to power are very slim. But the trauma we have experienced here as a country under his rule obligates us to draw conclusions."
- Elkin also thinks that Shaked isn't a problem. She likes being interior minister and she doesn't want another election, and she has no vote in the Knesset in any case. And yet he recommends not being complacent about matters concerning the budget. It's not easy being in a 61-member coalition. Mistakes can always happen, and there is always the fear that Netanyahu will try to poach someone at the last minute. The person who is already trying to deal with this is Foreign Minister Yair Lapid. Yesterday he was the first high-ranking minister to visit the unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev. He showed up in a convoy that included Labor and Welfare Minister Meir Cohen, Deputy Minister Yoav Segalovitz, who is responsible for the plan to deal with the violence in the Arab sector, and MK Mansour Abbas (United Arab List). Who would have believed that only a few months after such a government was formed, Abbas would be riding with Lapid in an armored car provided by the GSS? In a conversation with Bedouin local authority

chairpersons in the town of Abu Talul, Lapid sang Abbas's praises. "Thanks to his vision," he said, "you are no longer coming to ask for favors from the government. You are part of it, and partners with equal rights." Let's see Abbas dismantle the government now.