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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

November 24, 2021

Jerusalem Post

Controversial Illegal Electricity Law Advances

The Knesset Interior Committee voted to advance a [controversial bill](#) enabling thousands of illegally built homes to be hooked up to the national electricity grid. Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked (Yamina) and Interior Committee head Waleed Taha (Ra'am-United Arab List) reached a compromise on the wording enabling the advancement of the bill, which must still be passed into law three times in the Knesset plenum. Joint List MKs voted for the bill, even though they said it did not go nearly far enough. Blue & White faction chairman Eitan Ginzburg said that although the bill would mostly help the Arab sector because of a lack of government planning, it would impact all the local authorities in Israel. Ra'am leader Mansour Abbas officially launched the government's plans for bridging the gap between the Jewish and Arab sectors. [Dig Deeper "Back in Power, Israel's Left Finds Its Influence is Limited" \(Associated Press\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Israel Announces 50% Pay Increase for IDF Soldiers

Finance Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Defense Minister Benny Gantz agreed that soldiers doing their [mandatory military service](#) in the Israel Defense Forces will receive a 50% pay increase as of next year. The salary increases, which are being made in coordination with IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi, are expected to cost the government about \$291m in 2022 and will be partially funded by the existing defense budget with the rest coming from a special allocation from the Finance Ministry, an announcement from the defense minister said. Kochavi said that the pay raises are just one part of a far-ranging plan for helping soldiers in their mandatory service. The plan, he said, also involves improving conditions for lone soldiers (IDF soldiers who are not supported by their families) and service members who need financial assistance. [Dig Deeper "Alarming New Poll Shows What Israelis Think of the Army" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Ynet News

Bennett Signals Readiness to Escalate Iran Confrontation

Prime Minister Naftali [Bennett](#) signaled readiness to step up Israel's confrontation with Iran and reiterated that his country would not be bound by any new Iranian nuclear deal with world powers. "Israel is of course not a party to the deal and Israel is not obligated by the deal," Bennett said in a conference on security at the Reichman University. Indirect negotiations will begin on Nov. 29 about reviving the 2015 deal, which former President Donald Trump withdrew from, deeming it insufficient to shut down projects with bomb-making potential - a view shared by the Israelis. Iran, which denies seeking nuclear arms, has since the US walkout breached the deal with expanded uranium enrichment. Bennett, who took power in June, described Iran in a speech as being at "the most advanced stage of its nuclear program". [Dig Deeper "Israel Digs in Heels on Military Action, Warns Revived Nuke Deal Won't Thwart Iran" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Gantz Says Tehran Tried to Fly TNT Drone West Bank

Defense Minister Gantz revealed the locations of two Iranian drone bases that he said were used to conduct attacks against targets at sea in recent months. According to Gantz, one of the sites is located in the area of Chabahar and the other is situated on Qeshm Island, just off the coast of the Iranian mainland. Gantz warned that Iran's drone program was a threat not only to Israel, but to the entire region. Gantz also revealed that a drone launched by Iran from Syria into Israeli airspace in 2018 had not been on a direct attack mission — as had been implied — but was instead being used to [ferry TNT](#) to terrorist operatives in the West Bank. The defense minister also referred to a recent failed assassination attempt against the Iraqi premier, in which a number of explosive drones were flown into his house. [Dig Deeper “Johnson Tells Herzog World ‘Doesn’t Have Much Time’ to Deal with Iran” \(Ynet News\)](#)

Associated Press

Israeli, Moroccan Defense Ministers Meet in Landmark Visit

Israel and Morocco signed a landmark agreement that lays the foundation for security cooperation, intelligence sharing, and future arms sales. The memorandum of understanding is the centerpiece of a visit this week by Defense Minister Gantz to Morocco, which established formal relations with Israel last year as part of the US-brokered Abraham Accords. Gantz's trip is the first official visit by an Israeli defense minister to one of the Arab states that normalized ties under the accords. In a statement, Gantz said that the agreement was “very significant and will allow us to exchange ideas, enter joint projects and enable Israeli military exports here.” The agreement was signed during a meeting between Gantz and his Moroccan counterpart Abdellatif Loudiyi in Rabat, with military attaches and two Israeli parliament members in attendance. Gantz also met with the Moroccan military chief of staff, and was greeted by a color guard of soldiers clad in red tunics, blue slacks and gleaming gold epaulets. Ahead of his meeting with Loudiyi, Gantz paid his respects at the tomb of Mohamed V, the grandfather of the reigning monarch. [Dig Deeper “Morocco Acquires Israeli Anti-drone Air Defense System” \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

I24 News

Apple Sues Israeli Spyware Maker NSO Group

Apple announced that the tech company is suing Israeli spyware maker NSO Group for the "surveillance and targeting of Apple users" and is seeking to block access to its mobile devices. The cyber firm developed a spyware product called Pegasus that enables government agencies and law enforcement to hack smartphones and read data on the devices. Several reports alleged that Pegasus was used by various countries to target human rights activists and journalists. The lawsuit also includes NSO Group's parent company Q Cyber Technologies. Apple also announced a \$10m contribution to organizations involved in cybersurveillance research and advocacy. Earlier this month, the US Commerce Department announced that the NSO Group was being added to a federal trade blacklist for acting "contrary to the foreign policy and national security interests of the US." [Dig Deeper “NSO Group at Risk of ‘Defaulting’ on \\$500m After US Blacklisting” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Abbas Meets Putin, Seeks Quartet Role in Peace Process

Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas met with Russian President Vladimir Putin on for talks on reviving the peace process with Israel, in the context of Russia's support for the two-state solution. On the eve of the talks in the Black Sea resort city of Sochi, Abbas said that he would propose holding an international conference for peace in the Middle East under the auspices of the Quartet, which consists of the US, Russia, United Nations and European Union. "We are confident that Russia will support our efforts" to hold the conference, Abbas told the Russian news agency Sputnik. Reviving the Quartet was intended to prevent the US from playing an exclusive role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, said a Palestinian official in Ramallah. The current US administration "appears to be weak and not interested in playing a significant and influential role in the region," the official said. It was not clear whether the Abbas-Putin talks also dealt with divisions among the Palestinians, including the dispute between Abbas's ruling Fatah faction and Hamas, as well as the rivalry between the PA president and ousted Fatah operative Mohammed Dahlan. [Dig Deeper "Israel Pledges to Permit 4G Cell Service for Palestinians" \(I24 News\)](#)

Saudi, Syrian Intelligence Chiefs Meet in Cairo

Saudi Arabia's intelligence chief Gen. Khalid bin Ali Al Humaidan met with his Syrian counterpart Hussam Luka in Cairo, on the sidelines of the Arab Intelligence Forum. This comes as part of the Egyptian efforts to unfreeze Damascus' membership in the Arab League and end any Arab disputes. Egypt hosted the Arab Intelligence Forum, which was attended by a number of the intelligence services' directors in the region. During the forum that discussed many regional and international issues, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi addressed the attendants via videoconference and urged the directors to further cooperate in countering the challenges in order to preserve the Arab national security and stability. So far, no official statement has been released by Saudi Arabia or Syria on the meeting. Tarek Fahmy, professor of political science at Cairo University said that the meeting carries a symbolic significance and is an important sign indicating that Arabs welcome Syria's return to the Arab League after a 10-year hiatus. [Dig Deeper "The True Meaning of Sisi Canceling Egypt's 40-year State of Emergency" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Hold Me Back

By Ben Caspit

- **Despite Israel is reverting to its “hold me back” strategy. Will the gambit that worked (partially) in 2011 also work in 2021? We’ll find out further down the line. The chances aren’t good. Iran today isn’t the same country it was ten years ago. It is far closer to acquiring nuclear capability. It is on the cusp of qualifying as a nuclear threshold state. America today isn’t the same America either, and the challenge Israel faces is much more formidable as well. The Iranians long ago entered what Ehud Barak once called an “immunity zone.” They have spread out their nuclear program and buried [parts of] it deep below ground. It [i.e. taking it out militarily] won’t be a short, wham-bam affair the way it was in Osirak [Iraq] or Deir ez-Zor [Syria]. The purpose of the offensive that was launched yesterday by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, Finance Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Defense Minister Benny Gantz in his far more restrained manner, is to persuade the world powers as a whole, and the United States in particular, that we’re serious.**
- **This is a veritable repeat of the three long years between 2010 and 2013, during which there were moments when the Americans were sure that the lunatics were liable to attack Iran. Israel is concerned about two possible scenarios. The first is what is described as “treading water.” In that scenario, negotiations will be renewed, but no progress will be made. The Iranians will drag their feet. The world powers let them set the pace. In the interim, the Iranians will continue to enrich uranium, expand the stockpile of uranium that they have enriched to 60% and, possibly, they will secretly resume working towards downsizing a nuclear bomb to allow it to fit into a warhead, and manufacture a missile that is capable of delivering it to its intended target under the right conditions. The second scenario is an interim arrangement of some sort. That would be the worst of all possible outcomes [right now]. The JCPOA won’t be signed, on the one hand, but American sanctions would be lifted in exchange for the Iranians “freezing enrichment,” on the other.**
- **That scenario isn’t popular in Jerusalem either. That was the reason why our leaders emerged yesterday from their offices and began to rattle their sabers—in hope that the message would be heard in Washington posthaste. Paradoxically, the chances of the Bennett-Lapid government attacking Iran are larger than the chances were that the Netanyahu-Barak government would have. I am saying that in hindsight, but it is based on facts: Barak never intended to attack. He took Netanyahu for a ride, he put on an act, he slammed on the brakes all of a sudden and pulled a 180 a moment before D-Day. Without Barak, and as long as the top security officials were opposed, Netanyahu didn’t have the resolve to order the strike. One person who was a member of that government and is also a member the current one is Finance Minister Avigdor Lieberman. Whenever he was asked back then what was happening on the Iranian nuclear front, he would react with a dismissive wave of his hand and would snort disdainfully. “A waste of time,” Liberman used to say.**

- **“We’ll never attack. Barak can, but doesn’t want to; Bibi wants to, but doesn’t have the courage—so we’re grinding water” [a Hebrew idiom for doing nothing substantive]. Bennett is made of different stuff. For better and for worse. He is capable of making a decision of that kind at the moment of truth (we’re still a long way off from that moment). Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, if he becomes convinced that we have a “sword to our throats” (to borrow the term that was used by Meir Dagan), is also capable of making a decision of that kind. They have enough votes in the security cabinet to outvote Nitzan Horowitz and Merav Michaeli (on the assumption that they would vote against). If Gantz becomes convinced that there isn’t any other choice, the bloc comprised of Bennett, Lapid, Gantz and Liberman would be able to muster a majority.**
- **The Iranian nuclear program, which is taking on real shape and form with enriched uranium and centrifuges in front of our very eyes, isn’t a left-versus-right issue. It’s an existential issue. But the real story from yesterday isn’t the Iranian nuclear program. The real story is the Iranian activity all around us. When he was still a junior security cabinet minister, Bennett toyed with an idea, and even tried to pitch it to his colleagues who were the ones who made the actual decisions. He couldn’t understand why the Iranians could feel safe in Tehran while we were forced to fight non-stop with their proxies along our borders. When something blows up here in Israel, Bennett said in closed-door meetings, why doesn’t something blow up over there, in Tehran? Binyamin Netanyahu likened the Iranian strategy to a “cat playing.” Iran is like a cat that uses its long limbs to strike at us with its paws. We try to parry the paw or to attack it.**
- **The time has come, said Bennett, for us to land a blow on the cat’s head. Or, in other words, on the snake’s head. Yesterday Bennett said that in public, in a speech he gave at Reichman University. He also disclosed something else: Iran isn’t as strong as it pretends to be. On the conventional weaponry front, Iran is a country with a rusty army, an antiquated air force that is all but grounded, and is highly sensitive to the loss of human life. “Iran is corrosion [sic, should be corroded],” he said, and to a great extent was right. The first decisions he made as prime minister pertained to military buildup. The IDF is now investing billions in replenishing its stocks, missiles, rockets, emergency storehouses and developing new capabilities. Bennett’s view is that Israel needs to strike directly at Iran every time one of Iran’s proxies either strikes or tries to strike at Israel. Initially, those were only thoughts. He then tried to persuade others and to enlist support. Yesterday he publicly spoke about that out loud for the first time.**
- **In the past several months, according to foreign reports, Israeli operations against Iranian targets in Syria have increased. If Bennett’s policy of “direct strikes” is enacted, that could usher us into a new and dangerous era: the indirect war between Israel and Iran will become open warfare. Tehran will become a target. If Tel Aviv and Jerusalem are targets, the time has come for the Iranians to be targeted as well. Do the decision-makers in Jerusalem have the requisite courage to do it? Wouldn’t that qualify as a gamble that is dangerous if not down-right insane? There is no obvious answer to those questions. But they do reflect a new way of thinking outside all the boxes we’ve known up to now. Interesting.**

A Historic Opportunity

By Yossi Yehoshua

- **The decision to raise the salaries paid to IDF conscripts—which should have been made long ago, but better late than never, even if that did happen only thanks to pressure from the media—is a good juncture in time to move forwards and to quickly advance a military and civilian service reform that will be fairer and more equitable for all of Israeli society. Israeli society has gone through significant changes in recent years that have impacted the IDF in terms of the service performed by conscripts and career officers. Only swift intervention by the national leadership with adequate support will be able to stop the negative trends and change things before it is too late. The rate of enlistment in the IDF is the lowest it has ever been. Forty-four percent [of potential conscripts] do not enlist. As in the case of men, 17% of women drop out of military service after beginning it. Furthermore, motivation to serve in combat units has been dropping consistently since 2011.**
- **It would be a mistake to take seriously statements by military officials about how motivation has recently begun to rise; those statements are not supported by data that are measured by permanent parameters, and in-depth polling has found that even conscripts who say they are prepared to volunteer for combat duty prefer to serve in “combat-lite” units, and not in front line units. In addition to all that, one also needs to factor in the preference among teenagers and their parents to serve in technological units, such as 8200, and the IDF’s need for soldiers to serve in those units—and then you’ll find that soldiers who are fit for combat duty also serve there. As Yedioth Ahronoth reported last year, the IDF’s elite technological units are disproportionately filled by more soldiers from affluent communities that offer better education than soldiers from the periphery.**
- **By the same token, the IDF’s combat units are disproportionately filled with more soldiers with lower socio-economic backgrounds. All of which indicates that the IDF’s screening and placement methods have only served to deepen the divisions in Israeli society. In addition to all that, as a result of the decision to keep the IDF a “people’s army,” the IDF has an excess of soldiers who serve in its rear bases. The IDF proved during the coronavirus crisis that it was able to function perfectly well even when several tens of thousands of soldiers were absent. The final issue is the Haredi soldiers. The IDF, as noted, does not really need more soldiers. Battalions, such as the Netzah Yehuda Battalion, only make things more difficult for the IDF because of the unique conditions that those soldiers require and the high cost that providing for their needs creates. Terminating that would also put an end to the populist debate about their recruitment—the army can manage without them. Having said that, they should contribute to society. Given all of the reasons cited above, Israel now finds itself facing a golden opportunity to enact comprehensive reform. The idea is fairly simple and has been discussed several times by the top military brass in the past decade: to have all Israeli teenagers—Jews and Arabs alike—be processed by a virtual IDF “central induction base.”**

- **The army will have first dibs on who it wants and needs to draft either into combat service or into its technological units. The IDF will remunerate those soldiers with fair wages and, at the end of their service, the state will provide them with real advantages over every other young Israeli adult, be that in purchasing an apartment or in tax benefits. Anyone who is not drafted by the IDF, will be obliged to perform some other form of voluntary civilian service in organizations, such as Magen David Adom or Zaka, at hospitals, with the police or the firefighters. Gantz and Liberman, who decided to raise the soldiers' salaries, made a smart decision. Now is the time to pave the way for comprehensive service reform. The defense minister already has a ready-to-use program, titled "Service for All." That program is designed to integrate young Haredi and Arab men and women into civilian and professional service. That program has the support of the Defense Ministry and the current government. The Arab parties need to be enlisted to help get it enacted. We are facing an historic opportunity. Service reform is needed.**