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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

December 3, 2021

Arutz Sheva

Controversy in Bennett-Blinken Conversation

A briefing by a diplomatic source commented on Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's conversation with Secretary of State Antony [Blinken](#). According to the source, "It was a long, complicated discussion, 90% of which focused on Iran." The source added that Bennett spoke about Iran's ongoing violations of the 2015 deal, and its nuclear provocations within the negotiations. According to him, the solution is not to allow blackmail, and instead to force the Iranians to immediately pay a price for their blackmail attempts. Bennett also expressed his opposition to removing sanctions on Iran, especially as part of a partial deal which would practically speaking funnel massive amounts of money to the Iranian regime, the source said. The source noted that on the issue of [construction in Atarot](#), near Jerusalem, Bennett said the decision had been made by Jerusalem's District Committee, and that it had not yet reached the diplomatic echelon.

Times of Israel

Mossad Head Vows Iran Will Never Have Nuclear Weapons

The head of the Mossad spy agency said that a bad nuclear deal between world powers and Iran would be "intolerable" for Israel, vowing that the Islamic Republic will never acquire nuclear weapons. "It's clear that there's no need for uranium enriched to 60 percent for civilian purposes," David Barnea said during a ceremony to honor exceptional Mossad agents. "There's no need for three enrichment sites. There's no need for thousands of active centrifuges — unless, that is, there is an intention to develop nuclear weapons." "A bad deal, which I hope will not be made, is intolerable to us," he added. "Iran is striving for regional hegemony, wages terrorism that we are blocking every day around the world and is continuously threatening stability in the Middle East." "Iran will not have nuclear weapons — not in the coming years, not ever. That is my promise, that is Mossad's promise," he vowed. [Dig Deeper "Israel Arms up for a Possible Strike in Iran" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Mossad Recruited Iranian Scientists to Blow up Natanz

The Mossad was behind the destruction of one of Iran's most secure and important nuclear facilities, and they did this by discreetly recruiting a team of Iranian nuclear scientists, according to a new report by the [Jewish Chronicle](#). According to the report, as many as 10 nuclear scientists agreed to help destroy the centrifuge hall at the Natanz nuclear facility in April. However, it seems they did not know they were doing this on behalf of Israel, but rather for other dissident groups. Ultimately, the Natanz explosion caused significant destruction at the Natanz nuclear plant. From the start, Iranian media and officials accused Israel of being behind the incident, something Israel has never commented on, despite originally referring to it as an accident. Others further speculated that the US was somehow involved. However, according to the report, the destruction of the Natanz centrifuges was conducted by the Mossad alone and had been in the works for years.

Report: Israel Failed to Probe Shootings at Gaza Protests

A report by B'Tselem and the Gaza-based Palestinian Center for Human Rights said that Israel failed to investigate shootings that killed more than 200 Palestinians and wounded thousands at violent protests along the Gaza frontier in recent years, strengthening the case for the International Criminal Court to intervene. The Israeli military rejected the findings, saying the “mass riots” organized by Gaza’s militant Hamas rulers were aimed at providing cover for cross-border attacks. The military said alleged abuses were thoroughly investigated, with soldiers held accountable. Beginning in March 2018, Gaza activists organized weekly protests that were initially aimed at highlighting the plight of Palestinian refugees from what is now Israel, who make up three-fourths of Gaza’s population of more than 2 million people. But Hamas, the Islamic militant group that rules Gaza, soon co-opted the protests and used them to push for the easing of the Israeli-Egyptian blockade imposed on the territory when it seized power from rival Fatah forces in 2007. [Dig Deeper “Over 150 Social Media Accounts Linked to Hamas Removed From Platforms” \(I24 News\)](#)

Hamas Calls for ‘Plan’ to Undermine the Abraham Accords

A senior leader in Hamas’ political wing urged that the group must fight against the normalization agreements which neighboring states established with Israel. Last year’s [Abraham Accords](#) brought a series of agreements between Israel and other nations in the region, where states agreed to establish full diplomatic relations with the country. Hamas Political Bureau Charmain Ismail Haniyeh spoke out against the deals during a conference in Istanbul, Turkey, and called to take action to undermine them. “We must have an integrated plan to bring down normalization, which, unfortunately, has taken the character of military and security alliances with some countries,” he announced, according to a press release on Hamas’ website. Haniyeh outlined three objectives for the Islamist faction’s agenda - focusing on the status of Jerusalem, supporting what Hamas refers to as Palestinian “resistance,” and fighting against normalization agreements with Israel. [Dig Deeper “Israel Wants Erdogan to Act on Hamas” \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Lebanese Minister Whose Sparked Saudi Dispute to Resign

Lebanese Information Minister George Kordahi is expected to announce his resignation today to pave the way for a possible resolution of a diplomatic spat between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia sparked by comments he made, sources said. The sources said Kordahi's resignation aimed to open the door for negotiations by French President Emmanuel Macron to resolve the dispute during a planned visit to Saudi Arabia this weekend. Critical comments by Kordahi on the Saudi-led war in Yemen led Saudi Arabia in late October to expel Lebanon's envoy to the kingdom, recall its ambassador and ban all imports from Lebanon, dealing a new blow to the country's ailing economy. Other Gulf states that are historical allies of Lebanon, including the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, took similar punitive diplomatic measures. [Dig Deeper “Lebanese Businesses Pay Steep Price for Standoff with Saudis” \(Associated Press\)](#)

Associated Press

UN General Assembly Urged to Investigate Yemen Atrocities

More than 60 organizations urged the United Nations General Assembly to establish an investigative body to gather and preserve evidence of serious human rights violations during Yemen's seven-year conflict, including possible war crimes and crimes against humanity. The organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, said the matter is urgent, particularly after the UN Human Rights Council voted in October to shut down its investigation into atrocities in Yemen. The Group of Eminent Experts had reported that potential war crimes have been committed by all sides. The Geneva-based council's vote was a stinging defeat for Western nations and a victory for Russia, China, Bahrain and other countries. Yemen has been convulsed by civil war since 2014, when Iran-backed Houthi rebels took control of the capital, Sanaa, and much of the northern part of the country. That forced the internationally recognized government to flee to the south, then to Saudi Arabia. A Saudi-led coalition entered the war in March 2015, backed by the United States, to try to restore President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi to power. Despite a relentless air campaign and ground fighting, the war has deteriorated largely into a stalemate and has spawned the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Reuters

UN Seeks \$41b to Hotspots Led by Afghanistan, Ethiopia

The UN appealed for a record \$41 billion to provide life-saving assistance next year to 183 million people worldwide caught up in conflict and poverty, led by a tripling of its program in Afghanistan. Famine remains a "terrifying prospect" for 45 million people living in 43 countries, as extreme weather caused by climate change shrinks food supplies, the UN said in the annual appeal, which reflected a 17% rise in annual funding needs. In a report to donors, the world body said: "Without sustained and immediate action, 2022 could be catastrophic." Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Ethiopia and Sudan are the five major crises requiring the most funding, topped by \$4.5 billion sought for Taliban-ruled Afghanistan where "needs are skyrocketing", it said. In Afghanistan, more than 24 million people require life-saving assistance, a dramatic increase driven by political tumult, repeated economic shocks, and severe food insecurity caused by the worst drought in 27 years. In Ethiopia, where a year-old conflict between government and Tigrayan forces has spread into the Amhara and Afar regions, thousands have been displaced, while fighting, drought and locusts push more to the brink, the UN said. Nearly 26 million Ethiopians require aid, including more than 9 million who depend on food rations, including 5 million in Tigray, amid rising malnutrition rates, it said.

A Mapainik in the Tomb of the Patriarchs

By Amit Segal

- **There This week the current president gave the Israeli left a taste of what the Israeli right got from the previous president seven years ago: Rivlin, the ex-Likudnik, spoke about members of his people who had chosen to commit terrorism and about the Likud losing its way; Herzog the Mapainik took his left-wing votes to a Hanukkah candle-lighting ceremony in the Tomb of the Patriarchs [in Hebron]. These are strange times. The prime minister is from a faction named Yamina [meaning “to the right” in Hebrew] and got his start as the director general of the Yesha Council, yet he has refrained for half a year from visiting settlements, and he even passes on visiting Orthodox schools for fear of heckling and demonstrations. In contrast, the president who has tended the fields of the Labor Party for his entire political career began the school year in Har Bracha and the festival of lights in Hebron, where he was warmly received.**
- **Herzog’s strategic goal as president is rapprochement with the Israeli right, which is suspicious of the presidency as an institution: Peres didn’t visit the settlements even once; Rivlin visited often, but many of his statements angered his camp. Herzog is ready to pay a price with the far left in order to build a bridge with those who have found themselves deep in the opposition from the very start of his term. The question is where the bridge goes: it stands to reason that at the end of his term, he seeks to lay the groundwork to run for prime minister. Well, we ought to recall Herzog’s last race: no one ever ran a campaign that he so loathed. In 2015, Herzog served as the poster boy for people’s revulsion and disgust with Netanyahu. His campaign for prime minister was loaded with secularism that he does not subscribe to, hatred that he did not endorse, ad hominem disqualification that was out of character for him, and opposition to a unity government that was the opposite of his political doctrine.**
- **He despised every moment. Circumstances have granted him an opportunity that will not come a second time: Herzog sees the support of 87 MKs as an exceptional show of confidence that allows him to expand the relatively limited boundaries of the presidency as we have known it. The relatively new leadership has also granted him rare political freedom of action, as was proven in the crisis of the detained Israelis in Turkey and the latest talk with the president of China. Herzog used to feel stressed by every tweet by a Meretz MK. His motorcade kept going this week, all the way to Hebron.**

Hamas's Lebanese Branch

By Elior Levy

- **Hamas is not resting on its laurels. In the last few years, Hamas has secretly been building a branch of its military wing to create another front against Israel in the event of a military clash in Gaza. The baptism by fire of the new branch took place during Operation Guardian of the Walls, when members of the Lebanese branch fired rockets at northern Israel. The decision to establish the northern branch was made in 2014, after Operation Protective Edge, when the Hamas leadership in Gaza found itself on its own in the fighting against Israel, with no military assistance from outside. This paved the way to establishing a military force in Lebanon as an integral part of Hamas and subordinate to it. Saleh al-Aruri, the Hamas deputy leader, who shuttles between Qatar, Turkey and Lebanon, was the director of the project. In the first stage, it was decided to build a military force with the goal of harassing Israel by means of rocket fire from Lebanon and thereby create another front.**
- **Hamas realized this would not be a tiebreaker, only a means to divide Israel's attention during a clash in Gaza. Palestinians who identify ideologically with Hamas who live in Lebanon were recruited, mainly in the Tyre area. Their number is estimated to be a few hundred, and they operate in secrecy, under cover of being civilians. The center of Hamas's Lebanese branch is also in Tyre, but it may have bases elsewhere in Lebanon. The organizational structure of the new unit is hierarchical and orderly. While it is in touch with Hamas in Gaza, it is not directly subordinate to it and receives its orders from Hamas's overseas leadership only. The operatives received their training in producing and launching rockets from the Iranians and today they mainly work on producing rockets themselves with a range of a few dozen kilometers. Their activity is funded, among other ways, by drug smuggling and trafficking. In Hamas's vision, the unit will also have more advanced weapons down the line, such as drones.**
- **Hizbullah, of course, is aware of the Hamas branch in Lebanon and greenlit its establishment. But when it comes to the balance of power between them, Hizbullah can still cast a veto and not permit the Hamas branch to fire from Lebanese territory. At first, Israel did not attach too much significance to the new force. However, after it fired rockets [at northern Israel] during the last operation in Gaza, the security establishment began to monitor it with greater attention. The main concern today is that it will fire a large number of rockets if the situation in the Gaza Strip escalates, requiring a strong Israeli retaliation in Lebanon, which is liable to drag Hizbullah into the fighting. The worst scenario is that of another front in the north that neither Israel nor Hizbullah want. This concern became real when Hamas fired two rockets from Lebanon in July, one of which was intercepted by the Iron Dome and one that fell into the sea—even though Hizbullah had not authorized the rocket fire and had not been apprised of it.**