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Israel and Middle East News Update

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I24 News

Netanyahu Gives Permission to Move Forward with Plea Deal

Former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and leader of the opposition gave permission to move forward with negotiations for a [plea deal](#), Israel's Kan reported. Netanyahu and his family met with their lawyers to discuss the proposal. Netanyahu's lawyers urged him to accept the agreement, Kan's report states. His family, however, is still opposed to the move, concerned about the political future of Netanyahu. At the end of the meeting, Netanyahu decided to speed up the connection with Attorney-General Avichai Mandelblit in order to make a decision in the coming days, according to Kan. The deal would only see bribery charges against Netanyahu being removed, however, he would be required to agree to a conviction including "[moral turpitude](#)." This would eject him from public life for at least seven years, most likely ending his political career. [Dig Deeper "Coalition Projects Confidence Amid Fears of a Break up if Netanyahu Leaves Politics" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Haredi Military Draft Bill Fails After Arab Member Votes No

A bill regulating draft exemptions for yeshiva students was shot down in the Knesset, after a coalition member Ghaida Zoabi (Meretz) voted against it in protest of government policies she says target Arabs. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, Defense Minister Benny Gantz and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid announced they would seek a new vote later this week. It was unclear whether the coalition had the necessary votes, amid tensions between the United Arab List and other coalition members surrounding the Jewish National Fund's forestation work in the Negev. Three of the [United Arab List's](#) four Knesset members voted for the bill, and Mazen Ghanaim abstained. The draft bill is part of a broader proposal by the government to bring more ultra-Orthodox men into the military and encourage more of them to enter the workforce. [Dig Deeper "How Islamist Lawmaker Mansour Abbas Has Shaken up Israeli Politics" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Times of Israel

New Jerusalem Homes Beyond Green Line Advance

The Jerusalem District Planning and Building Committee advanced a 1,465-unit plan for a new neighborhood in the capital, half of which would be in the contested area over the 1967 ceasefire line. The new neighborhood — known as the Lower Aqueduct — has been planned for the land between the Jewish neighborhoods of Givat Hamatos and Har Homa, both of which are located beyond the Green Line. About half of the planned construction would be in the Mateh Yehudah Regional Council inside Israel; the rest would be in municipal East Jerusalem. [Israeli construction](#) over the Green Line in [East Jerusalem](#) is controversial, even among Israel's allies in Washington. After a plan to build a new neighborhood for ultra-Orthodox Jews near the Atarot Industrial Zone was announced in December, American lawmakers and government officials responded vehemently. [Dig Deeper "In First Since 2017, Police Try to Evict Family in Flashpoint Jerusalem Neighborhood" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

IDF Thwarts Attempted Stabbing Attack at WB Junction

Israeli troops thwarted an attempted stabbing attack at a junction in the West Bank, the military said. The IDF Spokesperson's Unit said the alleged Palestinian assailant was shot dead while attempting to stab one of the soldiers stationed at Gush Etzion Junction. The initial report from the IDF said, "an assailant arrived in a vehicle at the Gush Etzion Junction armed with a knife, he got out of the vehicle and attempted to stab an IDF soldier. The soldier fired towards the assailant and neutralized him." The military said no IDF injuries were reported and the troops were pursuing the vehicle and the driver who took the alleged attacker to the location. Following many attacks that took place recently, especially involving lone attackers, the army made a significant change in the defense of the intersection that became the focus of friction between Israelis and Palestinians, by building more secure posts and higher vantage points. [Dig Deeper "Palestinian Hit by Vehicle in Israeli Police Service Dies of Injuries" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Israel Hayom

Indonesian Officials Make Rare Visit to Israel Over Pandemic

A delegation of Indonesian officials made a rare visit to Israel recently to discuss coronavirus strategies, despite the countries not having diplomatic relations, Army Radio reported. The Indonesian health officials aimed "to learn how to deal with the coronavirus pandemic" and met with Israeli officials, the report said. The Indonesian government denied the visit had taken place. The Foreign Ministry would not confirm the report but said that Israel "believes in international cooperation in every regard to the fight against the coronavirus" and is prepared to share information and experience. Israel and Indonesia – home to the largest Muslim population in the world – do not have diplomatic relations, but for years there have been back-channel overtures to establish official ties. Indonesia has refused to normalize relations with Israel until the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, and has been a staunch supporter of the Palestinians. [Dig Deeper "Abraham Accords Peace Institute Sees 'Explosive Growth' on Horizon" \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

Axios

UAE Asks US to Re-Designate Houthis as Terror Group

Emirati Foreign Minister Abdullah Bin Zayed asked US Secretary of State Tony Blinken in a phone call to re-designate the [Houthi rebels](#) in Yemen as a terrorist organization. Less than a month after he assumed office, President Joe Biden rolled back the Trump administration's decision to make the designation. Since then, the Houthis have escalated their attacks against [Saudi Arabia](#) and other countries in the region — including an attack Monday in [Abu Dhabi port](#) killing three civilians. White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan condemned the Houthi attack. "We will work with the UAE and international partners to hold them accountable," Sullivan said in a statement. What started as a civil war in 2004 had escalated into a regional conflict, as the Saudis and other Middle Eastern players have come to the aid of the Yemeni government in the face of the Houthi insurgency. [Dig Deeper "Iran-Backed Houthis Aim to Redraw Map of Middle East with Attack on UAE" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Sudanese Forces Open Fire on Anti-coup Protesters

Sudanese security forces opened fire on protesters, killing at least seven people and wounding around 100 others in the country's capital in one of the deadliest days since an October military coup, activists said. Thousands had once again flooded the streets of Khartoum and elsewhere in Sudan to denounce the Oct. 25 military takeover that scuttled hopes of a peaceful transition to democracy. The coup came more than two years after a popular uprising forced the removal of longtime autocrat Omar al-Bashir and his Islamist government in April 2019. The turmoil has been amplified after Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok stepped down earlier this month. Hamdok, the civilian face of Sudan's transitional government, resigned after his efforts to bridge the gap between the generals and the country's pro-democracy movement failed. The deaths bring to at least 71 the number of people killed in near-daily demonstrations in Khartoum and other cities and towns in Sudan. Footage circulating online shows protesters, mostly young people, marching in the streets of Khartoum and its twin city of Omdurman. There were also protests in Port Sudan, Wad Madani Obaid and the western Darfur region. [Dig Deeper "Seven Dead in Crackdown on Anti-coup Rallies in Sudan" \(Reuters\)](#)

Police Using Tech to Pursue Suspects Without Court Orders

Israel Police have been using NSO's cell phone hacking Pegasus technology to pursue Israeli civilian suspects in regular criminal cases with no court orders for years, [Calcalist](#) reported. The astounding report, if true, would blow gaping holes through a number of NSO, police and potentially state prosecution narratives about the proper balance between collecting evidence and respecting citizens' privacy rights and court protections from unlawful searches and seizures. In fact, the entire system of searches and seizures for police wiretapping and other such invasive measures is supposed to be based on a carefully calibrated apparatus of approvals from courts. According to the report, the police, since 2013-2015, have been using cell phone hacking technology as a loophole because the specific technology was not discussed by prior law, which themselves were written before the technology existed. Despite that historical discrepancy, it has been clear from court decisions and prior precedent, that, if true, the uses by the police of Pegasus against suspects in regular criminal murder, corruption and other cases, would be a blatant violation of legal limits if they were carried out with court order. [Dig Deeper "Israeli NSO Spyware Found on Phones of Jordanian, Bahraini Women's Rights Activists" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Fateful Memory

By Sever Plocker

- The High Court of Justice will soon rule on an unusual petition: whether to instruct the government to demand that the German government pay it 17 billion dollars that it has not demanded up until now. The petition was filed January last year by a large group of Holocaust survivors and their organizations and was not summarily rejected by Justice Anat Baron. Baron, in fact, instructed the state to respond in writing. The hearing was scheduled, after several postponements, to next week [this week]. It will be held on the 70 th anniversary of the Knesset's approval, on January 7, 1952, to allow the Ben Gurion government to hold open negotiations with the government of West Germany on the payment of "collective reparations" for the atrocities of the Holocaust committed by the Nazi regime. In the mass demonstration against the negotiations that was held outside the Knesset building in Jerusalem, the leader of the opposition Herut party, Menachem Begin, called for civilian rebellion against the "wicked government."
- The negotiations with Germany were exhausting and replete with crises, until September 1952, when the final reparations agreement was signed in Luxembourg, in which the Federal Republic of Germany pledged to give to Israel, as the state of the Jewish people that had absorbed the majority of the Holocaust survivors, one billion dollars in reparations (equal to 34 billion dollars today). The reparations mainly took the form of German products and were invested in developing the economy. They set in motion Israel's fantastic growth miracle in the first two decades of its independence. And yet, there was something missing in the agreement: the participation of East Germany, the area conquered by the Soviet Red Army that became a Communist state.
- According to documents from that period, the extent of reparations demanded of East Germany was estimated at one-third of the Israeli overall claim, giving rise to the term "the missing third" and its current estimate of USD 17 billion. The Communist leaders of Germany utterly rejected Israeli feelers for reparations of any sort. The situation reversed completely after Germany's unification in October 1990. With its completion, the unified Germany inherited the debts of East Germany, including reparations to Israel. And then something happened that is not understandable. Since then, and to this day, Israeli governments have made no direct or indirect diplomatic efforts on the issue of the missing reparations.
- They have ignored the matter completely, aside from one random conversation that was never followed up between a senior Israeli official and a senior German official decades ago. It appears that official Israel has conceded to Germany, on behalf of the Holocaust survivors, who were not asked for their opinion, large sums of money that could plug quite a lot of holes in the welfare and infrastructure systems. The Israeli governments all counted on public forgetfulness, but there are always some people who remember. In Israel, Dr. Aharon Mor remembered. Mor is a former senior official in the Finance Ministry and in the Prime Minister's Office and a leading professional in the battle for the restitution of Jewish property in eastern Europe.

- He never stopped nagging the decision-makers and writing long, reasoned letters to them. Undaunted and undesperingly, he has devoted his time, his energy and his skills to this in the last few years; at his initiative, and with the help of the law office of Gilead Sher, a petition was filed a year ago asking the High Court of Justice to instruct the Israeli government to immediately demand the “missing third” of the reparations from the German government. The petition states that not demanding this would be a decision that suffers from “an extreme lack of reasonability.” It suffers from more than that; it suffers from historic moral blindness. In the reparations agreement, in all its sections and amendments, the Israeli government took on itself the right to speak and file lawsuits in the name of the Jewish people—a right that it cannot shirk based on the hackneyed claim that conceding the missing third “is within the discretion given to the government to run state affairs,” as per the State Attorney’s Office’s reply to the petition.
- Dr. Mor said emotionally: “Making a demand to unified Germany to complete the reparations agreement is both economically correct and morally justified. We must not relent at least as long as Holocaust survivors live among us, who are quickly vanishing, who are dying every day. Now is the last moment to raise the issue and put it on the public and diplomatic agenda.” The hearing in the High Court of Justice will be held a few days before International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the day that the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp was liberated in 1945.

Double Game

By Ben Caspit

- The headlines informed us that Netanyahu has given a “green light” to move forward with a plea bargain agreement, and that he is willing to accept, in that context, a moral turpitude clause. That information was never received by the State Attorney’s Office. Netanyahu said nothing in his own voice. According to the information that was available at the time that this column was filed, his lawyers hadn’t rendered an official, elementary and simple statement, something along the following lines: “The former prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, is prepared, in the context of a plea bargain agreement, to plead guilty to two counts of fraud and breach of trust, which will include a moral turpitude clause that will be in force for seven years from the date he completes serving his sentence.” No, no statement of that kind was formally received or was even semi-formally or quarter-formally received.
- There have been leaks and Netanyahu’s so-called confidants have spoken, but no official statement has been submitted [to the State Attorney’s Office]. Given that, for the time being nothing is final and everything is reversible, as usual with Netanyahu. He is playing a double game, which will allow him to reverse course the moment he wants to. That is how he has always operated. He always maintains plausible deniability. He did that when he courted Mansour Abbas like a Latin lover, but left no vocal record of any kind. He made countless concessions to Abu Mazen in the course of negotiations that were held in 2014, but he always did so via mediators and envoys, and never directly. Now he is using one hand to send his close confidants to talk to journalists and tell them that he has “decided” and “given a green light,” only to follow that up a moment later with the following statement: “In the wake of false reports I want to clarify: only statements by Netanyahu’s lawyers or spokespersons are credible announcements.
- Any other report is incorrect.” But that isn’t where it ends. A moment after the headline that was followed by a denial came a sophisticated spin. One of Netanyahu’s most overt and inferior mouthpieces, Yaakov Bardugo, posted the following unbelievable tweet: “Every word that gets written in the revised indictment in which Netanyahu confesses will be considered to be a word etched in stone. Netanyahu currently isn’t being extorted, as opposed to other witnesses with the police, and that is why, if a plea bargain agreement does get signed, the meaning of a confession [Bardugo made a spelling error and wrote the Hebrew word for “gratitude” (hodaya) instead of “confession” (hoda)] in the criminal process is full. Period.”
- The mistake is in the original. Let’s try to make sense of this cacophony. Netanyahu apparently wants to reach a plea bargain agreement, but he wants to retain the option, if that doesn’t work out, of pulling his usual about-face on the State Attorney’s Office and of spreading his lies and falsehoods online by means of his tireless envoys in the media and on social media. That is why he has announced off the record that he has made a decision, but has denied doing so on the record. What purpose did Bardugo serve? To reassure the State Attorney’s Office.

- To signal that he's on board. He realizes that if he doesn't get on board now, he might not be able to get on board later. On Sunday I wrote that the State Attorney's Office needs to demand as one of the preconditions for signing a plea bargain agreement, that Netanyahu give a public speech in which he says in his own voice everything that needs to be said: I wasn't framed; no coup was carried out by the law enforcement authorities; I fully admit to having committed two crimes, and am not saying that only as perfunctory lip service; I take back all of the accusations I have made against police officers, prosecutors and all the other law enforcement officials in recent years; I accept the moral turpitude clause that is stipulated by law.
- Meeting that precondition is essential, even though it cannot hermetically guarantee anything. Netanyahu is capable of ignoring and kicking over anything and everything. We all remember him saying in his own voice that he would step aside to allow Benny Gantz to assume his duties as prime minister, "without tricks and without shticks." We all remember him saying in his own voice that he would not try to arrange immunity for himself. We all remember him saying in his own voice that "this time there won't be an alternating premiership arrangement." And the list goes on. One only needed to listen to what was said by MK Shlomo Karhi, one of his most ridiculous envoys spreading lies, to blow a gasket: "The person who is worried about his legacy is actually Mandelblit, who is rushing to make this deal because he sees how the cases have been collapsing on him in court."
- He then went on to speak about the negotiations over a plea bargain agreement (which were held at Netanyahu's initiative) by saying, "He's going to get acquitted." The dilemma isn't easy. We're dealing with people who are professional liars. They haven't any shame; they haven't any conscience; they haven't any blood in their veins. Some of them believe the lies that they spread; others do so brazenly because they believe that it is not only okay but is actually desirable to lie on behalf of a leader of Netanyahu's caliber. But even if the court case proceeds and culminates in a full-blown conviction, nothing is going to change. They will rewrite the lie and will say that Netanyahu wasn't given a fair trial, that the judges are worse than the prosecutors and that Aharon Barak is pulling all of their strings. But isn't Aharon Barak acting now on behalf of Netanyahu? Yes, but if that fact stops serving the new version, then the facts will have to be changed to conform to the new lie.
- What ought to be done? How do we interrupt the string of lies and try to restore a modicum of sanity and normalcy to this country? State Attorney's Office officials remain pessimistic about the chances of a plea bargain agreement getting signed. They too are having a hard time coming to a decision on the matter. If a deal were being negotiated with someone who could be trusted to sign and then honor an agreement—that would be one thing. But just like Netanyahu can no longer find political partners who are prepared to work with him, he is now finding it difficult to find State Attorney's Office officials who are prepared to finalize a plea bargain agreement with him. He has burned every field and bridge, and now he is paying the price for doing that.