



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
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Israel and Middle East News Update

Wednesday, January 26

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News Excerpts

January 26, 2022

AI-Monitor

Netanyahu Vows to Continue Leading Likud

Battling Likud leadership candidates folded their tents following opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu's [announcement](#) that he was rejecting a plea-bargain agreement in his corruption cases and remaining head of Likud. One by one, candidates Nir Barkat, Israel Katz, Miri Regev and Tzachi Hanegbi announced their perpetual loyalty on social media to [Netanyahu](#), even though they were fighting over replacing him moments earlier. The only candidate who intends to challenge Netanyahu for the Likud leadership remains former Knesset speaker Yuli Edelstein, just as before Netanyahu's pondering of the plea deal ignited a succession contest. [Dig Deeper "The Netanyahu Plea Talks: Genuine or Shticks and Tricks?" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Israel Hayom

NSO Chairman Steps Down Amid Police Spying Scandal

Executive Chairman of NSO Group Asher Levi resigned from his position at the cyber surveillance firm Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit ordered an investigation into the [Israel Police's](#) alleged use of NSO surveillance technology against civilians without authorization. It is unclear whether NSO's now-infamous Pegasus spyware was used or if another software was employed. Nevertheless, Levi said his resignation was unrelated to the recent reports. According to allegations against NSO, police monitored the leaders of a protest movement against then-Prime Minister Netanyahu, mayors, and other citizens without court approval. The police have dismissed the report as inaccurate and said they only operate according to the law. [Dig Deeper "A Warning Sign": Israel Reaches All-Time Low in Annual Corruption Index" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

I24 News

President Herzog to Visit UAE Next Week

President Isaac Herzog and his wife Michal will fly to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for the first Israeli presidential visit, at the invitation of the Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed. Herzog will depart on January 30, meeting the de facto ruler. He will also meet with senior government officials and representatives of the Jewish community. According to a press release, he will open Israel's national day at the Dubai Expo 2020. Herzog said "We have the privilege of making history by making the first visit of an Israeli president to the United Arab Emirates. This important visit comes as the Israeli and Emirati nations are busy laying the foundations of a new shared future." He continued, "I believe that our bold new partnership will transform the Middle East and inspire the whole region. We are a peace-loving nation, and together we will expand the historic circle of peace of the Abraham Accords and create a better, more tolerant, and safer world for our children." "I thank Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed for this gracious invitation to deepen our nations' bonds of friendship." Israel and the UAE normalized ties in the United States-brokered Abraham Accords in 2020, allowing covert contacts to be brought into the open.

Israel Says It Hopes for Ties with Saudi Arabia, Indonesia

Israel's top diplomat said it hopes to build on its 2020 US-brokered accords with four Muslim nations and establish diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, but such deals would take time. Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's holiest two sites, and Indonesia, which has the world's largest Muslim population, have conditioned any eventual normalization with Israel on the addressing of the Palestinians' quest for statehood on territory captured by Israel from Jordan and Egypt in the 1967 Six-Day War. Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said Israel is looking to "expand the Abraham Accords to additional countries" beyond the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco. Despite the absence of official ties, Saudi Arabia agreed in 2020 to allow Israel-UAE flights to cross its territory. Both Saudi Arabia and Indonesia condemned Israel's airstrikes in Gaza during 11 days of hostilities with Hamas in May 2021. More than 250 Palestinians were killed in Gaza. Rockets fired by Hamas and other Palestinian groups killed 13 people in Israel.

PA Official: Lapid Meeting 'Opened Doors' for More Talks

Senior Palestinian Authority (PA) official Hussein al-Sheikh said that his meeting this week with Foreign Minister Lapid was positive and "opened the door" to expanding diplomatic talks, adding that they agreed to hold follow-up meetings. The meeting took place in Lapid's Tel Aviv home and went on for about an hour. The two had met before, but not since Lapid became Foreign Minister. The meeting was the latest in a string of encounters between senior Israeli and Palestinian officials. Al-Sheikh is one of PA President Mahmoud Abbas's closest advisers and directs the PA office responsible for handling ties with Israel. Al-Sheikh said he raised the issue of rising violence by settler extremists against Palestinians in the West Bank, while Lapid raised the issue of PA efforts to have Israel prosecuted in the International Criminal Court. [Dig Deeper "ADL, Other Jewish Groups Denounce 'Ongoing Terrorism' by Settler Extremists" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Iran President Says Nuke Deal Possible if Sanctions Lifted

President Ebrahim Raisi said an agreement with the [United States](#) over its nuclear deal with world powers is possible if sanctions on Iran are lifted, state TV reported. Raisi's comments came a day after Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian signaled a willingness by Iran to engage directly with the US in discussions over the deal if necessary to reach a satisfactory agreement. "If the parties are ready to lift the oppressive sanctions, it is quite possible any agreement can be reached," Raisi said in a live broadcast. Iran and world powers have begun another round of nuclear talks in Vienna, Austria aimed at salvaging the tattered 2015 nuclear deal. The meetings include all the deal's remaining signatories — Iran, Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China. The US has participated only indirectly in the ongoing talks because it withdrew from the accord in 2018 under then-President Donald Trump. Trump later re-imposed crushing sanctions on Iran and the Islamic Republic responded by increasing the purity of uranium it enriches and its stockpiles.

House Democrats Press Blinken on Military Aid to Egypt

House Democrats urged Secretary of State Antony Blinken to reprogram a portion of Egypt's annual military assistance if the North African country fails to meet the Biden administration's human rights requirements. After promising to make human rights "central" to the US-Egypt relationship, the administration said in September it would withhold \$130 million — a fraction of Egypt's \$1.3 billion in annual US military assistance — unless Egypt improved its rights record by the administration's deadline, reported to be Jan. 30. The administration reportedly told the Egyptian government that in order to receive the withheld assistance it would need to end a decade-old investigation of human rights defenders and civil society groups, as well as drop charges against or release 16 people whose cases the Biden administration has previously raised with Cairo. Egypt has since freed several prominent political prisoners but "continues to perpetuate pervasive and systemic violations of human rights," read the letter to Blinken led by House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Gregory Meeks. Separately, the State Department announced it had approved more than \$2.5 billion in possible arms sales to Egypt, which include C-130 Super Hercules aircraft and air defense radar systems. The department said the proposed sales "will support the foreign policy and national security of the United States by helping to improve the security of a Major Non-NATO Ally country that continues to be an important strategic partner in the Middle East."

Saudi Arabia, Thailand Agree to Restore Full Diplomatic Ties

Saudi Arabia and Thailand agreed to exchange ambassadors in the first high-level meeting between the two countries since a row over a jewelry theft nearly three decades ago led the Gulf state to downgrade ties. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and visiting Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha agreed on the appointment of ambassadors "in the near future" and to strengthen economic and trade relations, said a joint statement on Saudi state media. Saudi Arabia downgraded relations with Bangkok after a diplomatic row over a theft in 1989 of around \$20 million of jewels by a Thai janitor working in the palace of a Saudi prince, in what became known as the "Blue Diamond Affair". A year after the theft, three Saudi diplomats in Thailand were killed in three separate assassinations in a single night. The theft of the jewels remains one of Thailand's biggest unsolved mysteries and was followed by a bloody trail of destruction that saw some of Thailand's top police generals implicated. A large number of the gems, including the rare blue diamond, are yet to be recovered. Thailand has been eager to normalize ties with oil-rich Saudi Arabia after the spat that has cost billions of dollars in two-way trade and tourism revenues and the loss of jobs for tens of thousands of Thai migrant workers.

A Political Horizon

By Barak David

- Speaking in an interview to Walla News, PA Civil Affairs Minister Hussein al-Sheikh described the meeting with Foreign Minister Yair Lapid as very positive and said that it had “opened the door” to intensified talks between Israel and the Palestinians. “We want that door to remain open so as to advance in the future to a resumption of negotiations as well,” said al-Sheikh. The meeting between Lapid and al-Sheikh was held in Lapid’s Tel Aviv home, and it lasted around an hour. The two men had met previously, but this was their first meeting since Lapid’s assumption of office as foreign minister. Al-Sheikh arrived at the meeting a few days after being appointed as the PLO’s chief negotiator, a position that formerly was held by the late Saeb Erekat.
- His appointment is due to be formally confirmed at a PLO conference that is scheduled to be held on February 7. Al-Sheikh said that he passed on to Lapid a message from Palestinian President Abu Mazen that he believes in a two-state solution with Israel that will be achieved through direct negotiations, and that he believes that it is very important to create a political horizon between Israel and the Palestinians. “I told Minister Lapid that it is important that there be a political horizon between us and the Israelis,” said al-Sheikh. “It’s true that we talk about security, the economy and civilian issues, but it’s important that there be a political umbrella for everything that we’re doing. Without that, the situation is going to become very difficult.”
- Al-Sheikh said that Lapid told him that Bennett had been informed of their meeting and was not opposed to it. He said that Lapid told him that he supports and has backed Defense Minister Benny Gantz’s efforts to bolster the Palestinian Authority. “We also discussed other political issues, but I don’t want to get into the details,” said al-Sheikh. The Palestinian minister said that he raised with Lapid the issue of violent attacks by settlers against Palestinians in the West Bank. He said that Lapid raised the issue of the complaints Palestinians have lodged to the International Criminal Court in The Hague against Israel. Al-Sheikh reported that he and Lapid also discussed the state of the Israeli coalition government, political developments within the PLO, the situation in the Arab world and relations with the United States. “It was a positive meeting that can be built on, and we agreed that there would be follow-up meetings,” said the Palestinian minister. “The important thing to remember is that Israel’s problem isn’t with Mauritania, but with the Palestinians. If [Israel] doesn’t speak with the Palestinians, then with whom will [it] speak? Negotiations are held with the people you disagree with.” The foreign minister’s bureau offered no comment.

Is it Darkest Before the Dawn?

By Nadav Eyal

- In the face of tremendous uncertainty and when the nature of the threat isn't clear, a cautious approach is warranted. That maxim isn't controversial, and Prime Minister Bennett would certainly have embraced it a few months ago. If you don't know what's lurking behind the door and you're leery, it would be best not to open it until you know more. Health Ministry officials did not ask the government to cancel its decision to end schoolchildren's quarantines; they only wanted to postpone it by a week. In another few days we'll know whether the current wave has reached its peak and whether the number of people hospitalized in serious condition is beginning to drop. We might also have a better understanding of the uncertain and somewhat foggy preliminary reports about children's hospitalization with post-Omicron PIMS.
- The government should have been the first—and especially the education and health ministers—to say that we had better wait a bit. At least when it comes to children under the age of five, who aren't eligible for vaccination. Furthermore, there are now preliminary Health Ministry data that indicate a marked disparity in the protection that vaccinated children between the ages of five and 12 have and the protection that unvaccinated children have. [According to data from] the past two months, unvaccinated children are four times more likely to become infected than vaccinated children are and, as a result, they are also more contagious. Beginning tomorrow, a uniform policy regarding school attendance will apply to vaccinated and unvaccinated children. Shouldn't a discussion be held about that?
- The truth is that the government is scared. It is scared of the public anger over the quarantines, the tests and the restrictions. That is understandable since the pervasive sense is that the pandemic is nearly over. "It's darkest before the dawn," waxed poetic one official yesterday, "this is almost behind us." A group of charlatans, the it's-just-the-flu crowd, pretentious people who aren't at all familiar with the data—have all joined forces to paint the government into a corner and to say that the pandemic is behind us now. The experts know that more people will be sick after the peak of infection than were before that peak, and that number will drop slowly. Professor Yaniv Ehrlich [the CSO of MyHeritage] recently made a calculation that clearly illustrates that this isn't going to end with catharsis.
- In any event, no one—neither Bennett nor Netanyahu—knows how many people have actually become infected in Israel and, more importantly, when the number of people who are hospitalized in serious condition is going to begin to drop. The cabinet ministers have opted exclusively to ease restrictions and constraints. Yes, some experts have told them that restrictions aren't going to do any good anymore and that infection is so widespread that nothing more can be done to curb it. Some of the hospital directors have also fully supported the political leadership's decisions, and that is very important (they have been accused by their colleagues from the periphery of having abandoned them so as to be able to continue to perform elective surgeries).

- On the question of what ought to be done now in terms of quarantines and the patient load at hospitals, one group of academics has recommended restricting public gatherings. But that position won't come close to being endorsed as long as the number of people hospitalized in serious condition is lower than 1,200. If Bennett were in the opposition, what would he say about the government? Exactly what Opposition Chairman Binyamin Netanyahu said yesterday. Netanyahu acted for his own reasons and to serve his own interests, but that doesn't really matter; that is what oppositions do. The question is different: is the government, by painting a rosy picture, not radically out of touch with the grim reality (for the time being), which has opened the door to criticism from the opposition chairman? We can all hope that the numbers begin to drop today or that they began to drop yesterday. But hope isn't policy. That maxim was true for the former government and it remains true for the current government too.