Israel and Middle East News Update

Thursday, August 25

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Ben Gvir Reaches Out to Smotrich Amid New Push to Unite

Itamar Ben Gvir, chairman of the extremist Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) party, showered his former ally, far-right Religious Zionism party head Bezalel Smotrich, with compliments in an attempt to secure a unity deal that would see the two run jointly in November’s elections. Ben Gvir’s comments came after opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu called for smaller right-wing parties to run on a shared ticket in the election to ensure votes aren’t wasted on parties that don’t clear the electoral threshold. Kan reported that Smotrich would soon announce an alliance with former Yamina Member of Knesset Amichai Chikli, granting him three seats in Religious Zionism’s top 10 list. The renegade lawmaker was a key player in bringing down Naftali Bennett’s government in June. Dig Deeper “Polls Show Far-Right Ben Gvir on Rise as Religious Zionism Flirts with Threshold” (Times of Israel)

IDF Suspends Soldiers Caught Beating Palestinians

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) suspended four soldiers who were recorded on video beating Palestinians near Ramallah. Earlier this August, soldiers from the Netzar Yehuda Battalion allegedly stopped a vehicle and beat the driver and another passenger. The Netzar Yehuda Battalion, made up of former ultra-Orthodox Jews who have left the yeshiva hilltop youth and others from low-income families, has long been at the center of controversy regarding soldiers’ treatment of Palestinians in the West Bank, with numerous reports documenting misconduct by the battalion’s soldiers in recent years. An elderly Palestinian American died shortly after being detained by soldiers at an impromptu check point this past January. A military report had said that the death showed a grave “moral lapse” by the soldiers involved in the incident. Dig Deeper “IDF soldiers suspended after filmed beating Palestinians” (Jerusalem Post)

PA Urges Palestinians Not to Use Israeli Airport

The Palestinian Authority (PA) urged its citizens not to travel through Ramon airport in southern Israel, saying they should have their own airport. Earlier this month, Israel Airport Authority said that Palestinians from the West Bank would be offered flights from Ramon, in the resort city of Eilat, to destinations in Turkey. This came following pressure from the United States to ease strict travel restrictions which prevent Palestinians from using Israeli airports - including Ben Gurion, without special permission. Palestinians traveling abroad usually do so through Jordan, but there are often long delays while crossing the border. However, getting to Ramon isn’t necessarily more accessible, with travel times to Eilat taking up to five hours from the northern West Bank. Dig Deeper “Jordan Expands Power Supplies to the West Bank” (I24 News)
Hezbollah's Nasrallah Meets with Palestinian Islamic Jihad

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah met with Ziyad al-Nakhalah of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in Lebanon. The two discussed the recent war between the Gaza-based Palestinian armed group and Israel. “Sayyed Nasrallah and Nakhale tackled the latest developments in Gaza and West Bank, and assessed the battle which took place with the Israeli enemy on all levels: military, politics and media,” Hezbollah said in a statement, according to its media channel Al-Manar (the light). The two also discussed unspecified regional issues, as well as the “expected roles” by different members of the “resistance,” according to the outlet. Hezbollah has advised Palestinian Islamic Jihad on strategy before. In the early 2000s, Hezbollah encouraged the group to focus its attacks on Israel on more strategic locations, according to the RAND Corporation.

IAF F-35S Penetrated Iranian Airspace Months Ago

Israeli Air Force (IAF) F-35 advanced fifth-generation fighter jets penetrated Iranian airspace multiple times over the last two months, according to the Saudi media outlet Elaph (solidarity). Both Iranian and Russian radars failed to locate them, according to the report. According to the news site, Israel and the US have conducted large-scale exercises over the Red Sea in order to simulate an aerial and maritime strike on Iran and the seizure of Iranian vessels in the Gulf Sea. The exercises come as part of a series of drills conducted by the two countries, both secretly and publicly in order to prepare for strikes on Iranian nuclear sites. Israel has been preparing its aerial fleet - chief among them the F-35s - to be prepared in the case of a nuclear Iran, specifically upgrading the jets so that they would not require mid-air refueling. The IDF has held independent as well as joint F-35 drills with other countries over the last few months. An Arab source told Elaph that the exercises between the US and Israel show that Israel will receive support and assistance if it strikes Iranian facilities after a deal is reached with Tehran in Vienna. The source added that he does not rule out the outbreak of a conflict between Israel and Iran soon.

US Military, Iran-Aligned Fighters Exchange Fire in Syria

The US military carried out a counter-attack after taking rocket fire by a suspected Iran-aligned militia in Syria on Wednesday, according to two US officials. The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity given the preliminary nature of the information, said they believed the incidents left an unknown number of Iran-aligned attackers killed. The officials did not comment on any potential US casualties. The latest exchange of fire appeared to be retaliation after US military strikes in Syria at multiple facilities the Pentagon says were used by Iran-aligned groups that target the US and US-led coalition personnel in Syria. The officials did not comment on any potential US casualties.
Lapid Urges West to Reject Iran Nuclear Deal

Israel's Prime Minister Yair Lapid called on President Joe Biden and Western powers to call off a pending nuclear deal with Iran, saying that negotiators are letting Tehran manipulate the talks and that an agreement would reward Israel's enemies. Speaking to the foreign press, Lapid called the agreement a "bad deal" and suggested that Biden had failed to honor the red lines he had previously promised to set. Biden has been eager to revive the 2015 deal, which offered sanctions relief to Iran in exchange for curbs on Iran's nuclear program. It remains unclear whether the United States and Iran will be able to reach a new agreement. But the Biden administration is expected to weigh in on Iran's latest offer in the coming days. With an agreement appearing close, Israel has stepped up its efforts to block it. Dig Deeper “Lapid Close to Criticizing Biden on Iran as Netanyahu Looms Large” (Jerusalem Post)

US Responds to Iran Comments on EU Draft Nuclear Deal

US officials confirmed that the Biden administration sent its response to Iran's comments on the European Union draft agreement that would restore the Iran nuclear deal. The US move is another step toward a deal, though there are still gaps between the parties on several issues. It's not clear whether there will be another round of negotiations as a result of the US response. An Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson confirmed that the US response was received through the EU coordinator. The spokesperson said Iran will carefully study it and will share its comments with the EU coordinator. A State Department spokesperson did not provide any details about the US response. The White House has repeatedly denied its considering new concessions and made clear that it will not agree to any conditionality between the reimplemention of the 2015 nuclear deal and the international atomic energy agency investigations regarding suspicious undeclared nuclear activity by Iran. Dig Deeper “Creeping Toward Nuke Deal, US and Iran Face Gauntlet of Critics, Sticking Points” (Times of Israel)
Now Is the Time for a New Nuclear Policy

By Ofer Shelah

- Iran is the country that will decide whether or not there will be a renewed agreement between it and the world powers on the nuclear issue. Most of the various clauses that, according to reports, are still in contention are not related to issues at the heart of the negotiations—things such as the amount of enriched material, the ability to enrich, and future inspections—and it seems that the discussions surrounding these issues serve only to help the Iranians play for time in the hope of making additional gains. In Washington and European capitals, the die has been cast: the agreement will be signed if and when Ayatollah Khamenei decides. Viewed through Israeli eyes, the emerging agreement is worse than the one that former President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of in 2018 and less good than what was put on the table earlier in [the current round of] negotiations.

- Even worse will be the reality on the ground. The Iranians have made much progress in being able to build centrifuges, and they have the ability to enrich uranium much faster today than in the past. Israeli policy over the past decade has played a significant role in creating this grim state of affairs. It started with Netanyahu’s head-butt to the Obama administration, which included brashly wading into the sullied waters of American politics. It continued when the Netanyahu government pushed the Trump administration to pull out of the nuclear agreement, despite the fact that Iran had fulfilled its commitments and despite the fact that most professionals felt that a situation in which there was an agreement was preferable for Israel than a situation in which there was no agreement.

- Now, the current Israeli government’s automatic opposition to any agreement, its stubbornness on clauses pertaining to the nuclear issue, overexcited rhetoric about attacks that are carried out outside of Iran and operations that have been ascribed to Israel and which had nothing at all to do with the nuclear program. All these may have won points at home—who would want to appear weak in the face of Israel’s number one enemy?—but they have done very little to distance Iran from a bomb. It must be said: that even an agreement that is not good if it comes to be signed would be better [for Israel] than a situation in which there is no agreement at all.

- Iran has proven that it cannot be beaten with sanctions, with clandestine attacks, or threats of military action. Rolling back its capabilities and closer supervision of its actions will expand the range of Israeli security, and Tehran abides by the agreement—as it did in the previous agreement until Trump withdrew from it—this range may be extended until at least the end of the decade. But it is more important to drive the Iranian regime away from a decision to arm itself with nuclear weapons. History shows that countries that decided to produce a nuclear bomb have indeed done so successfully (and, incidentally, the number of countries that could reach the conclusion that only nuclear weapons give them absolute protection from military invasions could well rise as a lesson from what has happened in Ukraine).
This decision carries with it massive implications; therefore, the Iranian regime, extreme though it may be, has avoided doing so thus far. Israel’s current policy is actually pushing [Iran] in that direction. This is the time to seriously consider other policies. The starting point for this policy is that a nuclear Iran would pose a unique threat to Israel, both because a determined enemy would have a nuclear weapon and also because [a nuclear-armed Iran] would kick off a nuclear arms race around the entire region. Every move by Israel, even in the face of other areas of conflict between Israel and the Iranians, must be viewed through the prism of whether it draws Iran closer to this decision or pushes it further away from it.

The second assumption is that unless we are talking about the “Samson Option”—that is to say, an Israeli military attack (the late Mossad director Meir Dagan said that option should only be exercised in the event that “the sword is placed against our neck and has started to cut”)—preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons must not be undertaken by Israel alone. We must prepare this option, but bandying it about for domestic consumption and spreading delusions like, “We’ll attack and then the world will join in” will only push the Iranians closer to making the decision to go nuclear and to see that decision through. This game must be much more complex and sophisticated.

Iran is a massive country. It borders a Sunni nuclear power (Pakistan) on one side and a regional power ruled by the Muslim Brotherhood on the other (Turkey). Iran’s interests vis-à-vis the world and regional powers are complicated, and Tehran poses a threat to other countries in the region no less and perhaps even more than it does to Israel. Israel must act in cooperation with the international community headed by the United States and with its allies in the region to create checks and balances in the face of Iranian interests in multiple locations. It must carry out assassinations inside Iran only in the context of the nuclear program and must wean itself off the blind faith (or the political rhetoric) that our military strength is the true answer to all of Israel’s problems. Otherwise, Israel will push the Iranians towards a nuclear weapon instead of driving them away from it.
Israel Is Pushing the US on the Iran Deal but Knows Its Chances Are Slim
By Jonathan Lis

- The sentiment is growing among Israeli officials that the Biden administration will do everything it can to finalize the negotiations and sign a nuclear agreement with Iran. The chances of changing this momentum in the nuclear talks is likely remote, but Prime Minister Yair Lapid, Defense Minister Benny Gantz, and opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu have mobilized a campaign of public pressure on the United States and European nations. Those three men – each one a candidate for the premiership – hope that even if this campaign doesn't garner any achievements for Israel in the agreement, the initiative itself will help Israel score points in the arena of public opinion just months before the election.

- It can also advance talks on defense compensation with the US government and mark the start of efforts to get the international community on board for the next stage: A far-reaching agreement with Iran, or aggressive sanctions, for the day when the present deal expires. Lapid publicly criticized the intentions of the Biden administration. He said the agreement is a bad one that "does not meet the standards that President Joe Biden set: to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear state." The criticism was measured, and Lapid took pains not to harshly taunt Biden or his staff, fearing that a more scathing tone would only hurt Israel.

- Political officials said that Lapid "is determined not to make public confrontations with Biden, like those led by Netanyahu against Barack Obama" ahead of the signing of the original 2015 nuclear accord. At the height of that dispute was Netanyahu's speech to Congress. "Because of that speech, they took Israel out of the meeting rooms," said the sources. "We saw that it didn't help. We can't threaten our relations with the United States." Israel's talking points on the issue now contain an updated message – one easier to parse and understand: Not only will the new accord have difficulty restraining Iran's nuclear efforts, but it will also fan the flames of the country's terrorist operations. Lapid said that lifting the sanctions on Iran will give the country about $100 billion a year "that will not build schools or hospitals but be used to destabilize the Middle East and sow terror throughout the world.

- "This money will fund more attacks on American bases in the Middle East, be used to strengthen Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad," he said. "This is money for exactly the same people who try to kill novelists and philosophers in New York and, of course, will be used to strengthen the nuclear program." Israel has never managed to influence the wording of the deal, which is being formulated between Iran and the world powers. Its main influence has been on the clauses outside of the agreement itself. These include the US commitment not to remove the Revolutionary Guards from its list of designated terror organizations and a series of other pledges that the United States may or may not keep – such as not closing the International Atomic Energy's investigation into Iran.
Israel is pressuring the Biden administration to stand firm on other issues as well: to not lift sanctions on Iran that are not part of the original agreement and to not grant it economic guarantees in the event that the US will eventually decide to withdraw from the agreement for a second time. In any case, Israel’s political leaders are well aware that Washington is not interested in fulfilling the main request they presented in recent years – establishing a significant and intimidating military threat against Tehran. Israel has no such capabilities, in any event, officials believe. As Lapid is holding his dialogue with the Americans, he is working on the European front at the same time. Over the past few days, he spoke with French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. In these conversations, Lapid expressed the belief that many of the repercussions of lifting the sanctions imposed on Iran have not been taken into account. Lapid criticized the conduct of the countries’ representatives in the negotiating rooms and wondered whether European Union representatives were properly utilizing their authority. According to an Israeli official, even though the two leaders listened to Lapid, the conversations did not yield much in terms of agreements.