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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

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Times of Israel

Knesset Committee to Vote on Judicial Overhaul Legislation

The Israeli government's contentious judicial overhaul legislation is swiftly **advancing** toward its first reading in the Knesset plenum after a coalition lawmaker announced that voting on the bill in committee will begin by early next week. Although opposition members of the Knesset Constitution, Law and Justice Committee, where the legislation is being prepared, could delay the advancement of the legislation by several days by submitting reservations, it will likely be voted out of committee and brought for an initial vote in the plenum in the next two weeks. The bill would then be returned to the committee for further preparation before the second and third votes in the plenum to pass it into law.

Ynet News

Israel Suspends Razing of Palestinian Jerusalem Building

Despite the pressure from National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, Israel decided to postpone the demolition of East Jerusalem buildings amid international pressure. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu succumbed to pressure from the United States Embassy and European envoys to suspend the demolition. The building houses some 100 Palestinians from nine families and the initial decision to demolish it was made in 2014 after it was constructed without a permit. The High Court of justice ordered the demolition of the building, and over the years, negotiations with the Jerusalem Municipality were conducted in an attempt to change the decision. The talks did not yield results, and the stated deadline for self-demolition of the building passed on December 7. Ben-Gvir, who campaigned on his promises to fight illegal Palestinian construction, said the demolition would take place. "It will happen. If not tomorrow, then the day after tomorrow, if not next week, then in two more weeks, but it will happen."

Ha'aretz

Syria Denies Claim That It Requested Israeli Earthquake Aid

Pro-Assad regime media denies Israel's claim that it agreed to provide emergency aid to Syria following a Russian request for assistance in the wake of a massive earthquake that left 4,300 people dead across Turkey and northwest Syria. Such a move would constitute unprecedented cooperation between the two countries, which technically remain in a state of war. The pro-Syrian government daily al-Watan (*the Homeland*) denied requesting aid from Israel, writing that the reports in Israel were a part of Netanyahu's propaganda campaign. "How can Syria request aid from a body that killed Syrians for decades?" the report added. **Israel** has reportedly agreed to transfer basic equipment such as blankets and medicine but is not ready to provide medical treatment to the injured. However, **Israel** is willing to provide treatment on Turkish soil or by opening the border crossing in the Golan Heights and admitting Syrians to Israeli hospitals. **Dig Deeper** "[Why Was the Turkey-Syria Earthquake So Bad?](#)" (Reuters)

150 Israeli Soldiers in Turkey for Quake Rescue Efforts

An IDF delegation consisting of 150 troops arrived in Turkey to help in rescue efforts after a [massive earthquake](#) left thousands dead, injured, and trapped. The operation – named "Olive Branches" is the military's 30th search and rescue mission in the past 41 years and is being led by Col. Golan Vach, who said it was "an honor to help our friends in Turkey." "This is the worst situation since the earthquake in Haiti" in 2021, in which 2,250 people died, he noted. We are also ready for humanitarian aid, but the Turkish government has requested search and rescue teams at this stage. We are aware that other earthquakes could happen," Vach said. An Israeli military mission also helped Turkey in 1999, when a catastrophic magnitude 7.6 earthquake resulted in the death of over 17,000 people. The country sits on top of major fault lines and is frequently shaken by earthquakes. [Read More "How Will Turkey's Killer Earthquakes Impact the Country's Politics?" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Herzog Speaks with Turkey's Erdogan After Earthquake

Israel's President Isaac Herzog conveyed his condolences on behalf of the people of the Jewish state to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan following a disastrous earthquake in the country. Erdogan thanked Herzog for the condolences and rescue mission provided by Israel and emphasized that the aid would greatly help the many forces that must have been working for many hours. Erdogan also stressed that he is grateful for Israel's standing by "its friend Turkey" in these difficult times. In the conversation, Erdogan told Herzog the latest data regarding the disaster and noted that this was the largest earthquake in the history of the Turkish Republic. Herzog, in response, noted he spoke with Netanyahu as well as Opposition Leader and former prime minister [Yair Lapid](#), and "they concluded that we in Israel are united in our desire to help Turkey as much as necessary." Erdogan also expressed his "deep condolences" to Herzog and the Israeli people for the attack that happened last week at the Neve Ya'akov synagogue in east Jerusalem. [Read More "Earthquakes: A Familiar, Looming Threat to the Middle East" \(I24 News\)](#)

Interior Ministry Furthers Israel's Earthquake Preparedness

Israel's Interior Ministry is working to increase the nation's level of preparedness for earthquake emergency scenarios, according to a statement. Tens of millions of Israeli shekels in relief funds were transferred to local municipal authorities, specifically those more at risk of experiencing earthquakes. During the briefing, Eli Regev, the director of the Interior Ministry's emergency services administration, referenced the 7.8 magnitude earthquake that shook central Turkey. The quake was also felt in Israel, and a tsunami alert was received but ultimately deemed irrelevant as there is no danger of a tsunami in Israel. A year ago, the Interior Ministry established an interdisciplinary committee to handle earthquakes, which would work in conjunction with Home Front Command, the Housing Ministry, and the Defense Ministry.

Ukraine Demands Condemnation, Loans From Israel

Ukraine has presented Israel with a list of demands ahead of an expected visit by the Jewish state's Foreign Minister Eli Cohen to Kyiv this week, among them a public condemnation of Russia's invasion and a \$500 million loan. Cohen is expected to visit the Ukrainian capital sometime this week for the re-opening of Israel's embassy, making him the first foreign minister from the Middle East and the first Israeli minister to visit the city since the war broke out nearly a year ago. Kyiv sees his visit and how he responds to the requests – which also include medical treatment in Israel, anti-missile technology, and public support for Ukraine's territorial integrity – as a test of Israel's new government and its policy toward the war. Cohen will reportedly meet with his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba and asked to meet with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky, who could potentially be in Belgium at the time addressing European Union leaders. A Ukrainian official said such a meeting would only take place if Israel shows a willingness to positively answer Kyiv's requests: "Zelensky won't meet Cohen just for a photo op." [Read More "UN Chief Fears World Headed For 'Wider War' Over Ukraine-Russia" \(I24 News\)](#)

The Media Line

Iran Announces 60% Uranium Enrichment at Fordow Plant

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani announced that Tehran had informed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of its decision to start enriching uranium to 60% purity at Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant in November 2022. The statement was made in response to a joint statement by the United States, Britain, France, and Germany, which accused Iran of not meeting its nuclear obligations, as shown in a recent IAEA report. According to Kanaani, Iran informed the IAEA of its uranium enrichment on November 17, 2022, and all modes of enrichment were mentioned in the design information questionnaire (DIQ) submitted to the agency. He stated that no new or contradictory measures had been implemented at the facility compared to November's DIQ. However, the IAEA criticized Iran for making an "undeclared change" to the interconnection between the advanced machines enriching uranium at the Fordow plant. The spokesman of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, Behrouz Kamalvandi, dismissed the IAEA's claim as a "mistaken" report by an inspector. In recent months, the IAEA has expressed concerns about Iran's cooperation with the agency. On November 17, 2022, the IAEA's Board of Governors passed a resolution calling on Iran to collaborate with the agency's investigators regarding the alleged "traces of uranium" at several of its "undeclared" sites. Iran has repeatedly rejected these allegations. [Read More "Russia's Lavrov in Iraq to Boost Relations Amid Ukraine War Isolation" \(I24 News\)](#)

Netanyahu Faces a New Political Balancing Act

By Amos Harel

- The city of Jericho and the Aqbat Jabr refugee camp adjacent to it are not exactly symbols of the Palestinian armed struggle. During the two intifadas, as well as in other periods of tension, Jericho was almost entirely disconnected from what was happening in other West Bank cities. During the first phase of the Oslo agreement, Israel transferred control of Jericho to the Palestinian Authority, giving it its first foothold in the West Bank alongside the control of the Gaza Strip. The assumption was that, if needed, the city could be sealed off to prevent terrorists from getting out. But over the last 10 days the sleepy city has come to the attention of Israel's defense establishment. It all began after a failed terror attack during which a Palestinian entered an Israeli restaurant at the Almog Junction south of the city, fired a single bullet, and then fled in a car with another Palestinian. It was later discovered that his gun had jammed.
- A Shin Bet investigation found that the man belonged to a Hamas cell that had been operating out of a safe house in Aqbat Jabr and had been planning further attacks. At the end of last week, Israel Defense Forces troops entered the camp, exchanged fire with armed men, and fired anti-tank missiles. Six Palestinians were wounded, but the cell members managed to escape. On Monday morning, the army tried again to find them. A combined force of the IDF and Shin Bet spread across the camp and exchanged fire with militants that, left five armed Palestinians dead and three wounded. Most of them appear to have been members of the cell. There were no Israeli casualties. Unusually, the force that exchanged fire with the Palestinian militants belongs to the border defense units – a mixed battalion that includes female soldiers who took part in the fighting.
- Now we will have to wait and see what the response to the killing is, whether it is a terror attack in the West Bank or rockets from Gaza. Since the start of the year, Palestinian deaths in the West Bank have been running at more than one a day on average. In the last week, the Gaza border has been heating up, including rocket fire, anti-tank missiles, and machine gun fire. The question is whether Hamas will decide to avenge the deaths of the militants in Jericho or let other Palestinian groups do the work. Several weeks ago, Bezalel Smotrich met with Civil Service Commissioner Prof. Daniel Hershkowitz and his senior staff. On the agenda were Smotrich's demands regarding appointments to the Civil Administration, which he controls in his role as minister in the Defense Ministry in charge of settlement affairs.
- During the conversation, the minister clarified his plans and goals in the post, which he holds together with the Finance Ministry. "I spend four days a week in my office at the Finance Ministry," Smotrich said. "I am at the Defense Ministry only one day a week. But make no mistake – the most important task in my eyes is my mission at the Defense Ministry." Smotrich added that his work at the ministry would manifest itself in "extensive settlement activity" aimed at dictating the future of West Bank settlements for years to come. Defense officials believe that Smotrich has the means of ensuring their cooperation because, as finance minister, he is the one who controls the budget.

- Several days ago, he uploaded a picture on Twitter of a late-night meeting with his senior staff. Anyone who looks carefully at the image can see what was written on the whiteboard next to Smotrich: “Chief of staff [budget] increases.” The IDF has been waiting a long time for the treasury to increase pension payments as a way of enticing career officers not to retire early. It’s unlikely that the image of the whiteboard appeared by accident. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has begun his term with an attack on the justice system whose goal is to bring about a legal revolution in Israel. He is moving quickly and decisively at a time when the opposition and the justice system itself are still trying to fully understand his intentions. But in order to realize his goal and rescue himself from a criminal conviction, Netanyahu needs the help of his coalition partners, each one of whom has a political agenda and interests of his own. Netanyahu needs to juggle them all and strike a balance between several goals he is trying to advance in parallel.
- If he were to confer with prosecutors, the judges, and the protesters and seek real negotiations over a compromise (and not the fake one being promoted on his behalf by President Isaac Herzog), he would have to restrain his justice minister, Yariv Levin, who might resign if he felt that he was not being given everything he wanted. If Netanyahu, instead, moves forward as planned, he will have to simultaneously fulfill his promises to Smotrich and National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir. However, allowing the two to advance their agendas may cost Netanyahu a confrontation with Washington and aggravation of tensions in the territories. It is obvious to defense officials that Smotrich wants to move quickly. Thus, he is working to call his first meeting of the Supreme Planning Council in the West Bank, which is expected to approve the construction of thousands of new housing units – a move that will certainly complicate matters with the United States.
- The fact that the Biden administration doesn’t rely on Netanyahu’s promises was underlined by the unusual step taken by Secretary of State Antony Blinken when after his visit to Israel and the West Bank last week, he decided to leave behind a senior official, Barbara Leaf, to monitor the situation. Despite the extremist government he chose to form, Netanyahu continues to take a restrained line vis a vis the Palestinians, in contrast to his partners. On every issue that has arisen over the last few weeks – preventing an escalation in Gaza after the rocket fire, tensions with security prisoners, the evacuation of the Or Hachaim outpost, and a delay in evacuating the Bedouin settlement of Khan al-Ahmar – he has consistently gone for the more moderate approach.
- By comparison, Ben-Gvir has sought to stir things up – his visit as national security minister to the Temple Mount, demanding that the Israel Prison Service toughen conditions for security prisoners, demolishing illegal homes in Jerusalem, and constant incitement against Israeli Arabs. Ben-Gvir boasts of preventing Palestinian prisoners from baking their own pitas and even released a video in which he is seen eating a lava while vowing that no prisoner will ever enjoy the same privilege. In the background lurk more serious tensions in regard to dispersing senior prisoners among different prisons and the punishment of female prisoners who expressed joy at the terror attack in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Neveh Yaakov.

- In recent days, tensions have eased in the prisons. Ben-Gvir and the IPS denied that they had reached understandings with the prisoners. But based on experience, it's fair to assume that Egyptian intelligence again entered the picture and that Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders in the prisons were given messages of assurance that were coordinated with Israel. Despite the relatively good meeting King Abdullah had with Netanyahu (relations between the two, in general, are not good), Jordan is disturbed by what is happening on the Temple Mount/Haram Al-Sharif and especially by Ben-Gvir's provocations. During his visit to the region, Blinken mentioned the possibility of Netanyahu visiting Washington before the start of the Muslim month of Ramadan on March 22 (Netanyahu had hoped for an earlier invitation towards the end of February; the Americans may be delaying the meeting due to opposition to his judicial revolution). Like Jordan and Egypt, the US is concerned about a possible flare-up in Jerusalem and the territories during Ramadan.
- In talks in Ramallah, the US secretary of state dedicated a lot of time to concerns about the impact of an increasingly weak Palestinian Authority. Blinken urged its elderly chairman, Mahmoud Abbas, to deploy Palestinian security forces in Jenin and Nablus. The Palestinians are talking about an American "Dayton 2" program for the deployment of security forces in the northern West Bank, similar to the Dayton training program 16 years ago, following the second intifada. The PA's announcement that it was ending security coordination with Israel in response to IDF operations in Jenin at the end of January that left 10 Palestinians dead in practice has not been implemented. The two sides continue to cooperate on urgent matters. But politically, Israel and the PA have almost no relations.
- For now, there is no back channel of the kind the previous defense minister, Benny Gantz, had maintained with Abbas. Most communications with the PA are done through the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories or the Shin Bet. Nahum Barnea wrote in an article published over the weekend in Yediot Aharonot that the Biden government, which is concerned about a flare-up in the territories while seeking to curb the legal revolution in Israel, is angling for a deal with Netanyahu. In it, the Americans would promise the prime minister to step up measures against Iran's nuclear program and help realize his dream of reaching a normalization agreement with Saudi Arabia in exchange for curbing his plans in the two areas of concern to Washington.
- The change in the US approach was also evident in the joint "Juniper Oak" military exercises with the IDF last month, where the two sides attacked targets in a manner reminiscent of a joint operation against Iran. Netanyahu is using Iran as an argument, and perhaps an excuse, for restraint in his conversations with his partners on the right. As he sees it, they should take Iran's policy into account in the territories so as not to disrupt the preparations for an attack on Iran. But for more than a decade, the prime minister has been waving the Iran card like this for domestic purposes. It is not certain that his partners will be so easily convinced. On the agenda, it should not be forgotten, is the risk of Iranian revenge in response to the drone attack attributed to Israel in Isfahan last week.

Tensions Rise on the Gazan Front

By Matan Tzuri and Yoav Zitun

- **After three instances of rocket fire from Gaza into Israel in the past ten days, air raid sirens were also set off twice in the past two days in what proved to be false alarms, but which nevertheless further undermined the local residents' sense of security. Air raid sirens were triggered in Sderot and in communities in the Shaar Hanegev Regional Council. The IDF subsequently announced that the sirens had been triggered by heavy machine gun fire. No Iron Dome batteries fired missiles. The authorities in the Gaza periphery communities quickly informed the local residents that the Red Color alert had not been triggered by rocket fire. A woman in her thirties suffered from shock as a result of the air raid sirens and required medical attention. The IDF subsequently issued a statement announcing that the siren had been a false alarm and that the malfunction was being investigated.**
- **While it is true that heavy machinegun fire had been recorded in the area, that is not supposed to trigger air raid sirens. IDF officials said they believed that the Red Color alert was sounded as a result of the heightened security tensions in the past two weeks and the oversensitivity among [troops who serve] in air-defense capacities and in the Home Front Command. Military officials also commented last night on reports as if the Iron Dome had intercepted an aerial vehicle over the Gaza Strip after it had gained excessively high altitude. The explosion produced panic in Gaza periphery communities.**
- **IDF officials said they believed that a flock of birds flying in the Gaza Strip had been misidentified as a Gazan UAV. An IDF inquiry found that the Iron Dome battery had operated in keeping with all the rules and protocols and that good operational judgment had been used. The above-cited two incidents come on the heels of heightened tensions with the terror organizations in Gaza. Less than a week ago, rockets were fired out of Gaza at Israel, which prompted an IDF air strike in Gaza. Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades assumed responsibility for the rocket fire, saying it had fired the rockets in response to a decision to place female Palestinian prisoners in solitary confinement after they had celebrated the massacre in Jerusalem's Neve Yaakov neighborhood, in which seven people were murdered.**
- **The Palestinians claimed that the "prisoners were brutally attacked. This is an unprecedented situation of oppression, tear gas, and police dogs. The attack on the prisoners has very severe implications, and the prisoners' movement in all of the prisons is preparing to respond to that barbaric behavior." Israel's Gaza policy has remained unchanged for the time being, and thousands of Gazan laborers will continue to be allowed to enter Israel every week to work. Local leaders in the Gaza periphery have refrained from criticizing the government for the time being, but that is likely to change if the rocket fire is renewed. "We very tense, and our nerves are very raw," said a Gaza periphery security official. "Operation Breaking Dawn was carried out just this past summer, and even though it feels like a long time has passed, there are still people—and especially children—who remain emotionally scarred by the air raid sirens.**

- **Quiet over a long period of time goes a long way to healing, but every air raid siren brings it all crashing down.” Residents of southern Israel are worried about a renewed escalation in hostilities, knowing that security developments in Judea and Samaria/West Bank might impact stability where they live. Despite their anxiousness, and in response to reassuring messages from security officials who have said that they do not anticipate a major flare-up in the foreseeable future, the local residents are trying to go about their day-to-day lives as usual. In keeping with that decision, the Red South Festival [held during the anemone season] is being held this year as scheduled.**