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## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Friday, March 17*

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# News Excerpts

March 17, 2023

## Axios

### **Scholz Urges Netanyahu to Consider Judicial Compromise**

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said that in his meeting with Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#), he expressed concern over the Israeli government's judicial overhaul plan and called on the Israeli prime minister to consider a compromise proposal put together by the Israeli president. Germany is Israel's second most important ally after the United States. Any damage to the Israeli-German relationship could have broader implications for Israel's standing in Europe. The ruling coalition plans to bring the first part of the judicial overhaul legislation to a final vote in the Knesset next week. Netanyahu claimed there is a difference between an independent supreme court and an "all-powerful supreme court" and stressed the plan is aimed at restoring the balance between the different branches of government. [Read More "Opposition Heads Back Herzog's 'Not Ideal' Proposal, Pan Coalition for Dismissing It" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## Times of Israel

### **Israelis Block Roads as Netanyahu Rejects Compromise**

Tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets across Israel as part of a day of "escalating resistance to dictatorship," blocking roads and protesting the government's continued advance of controversial legislation to radically overhaul the judiciary and restrict the powers of the High Court of Justice. Many of the protesters said they were inspired to come out and demonstrate after the government showed no signs of slowing down its legislative efforts and rejected an alternate proposal for judicial reform from President Isaac Herzog. At least 21 people were detained in several incidents, including two motorists accused of pepper-spraying demonstrators who blocked the road. There were no immediate reports of injuries. Unlike last week, police did not use stun grenades. [Read More "Protests Ramp up as Govt Rejects Compromise on Judicial Reform" \(I24 News\)](#)

## Ynet News

### **IDF Reservists Say Will Not Report to Duty as of Sunday**

Some 650 reserve troops from the intelligence and cyber units in the IDF announced that, as Sunday, they would no longer volunteer for service. The 450 intelligence members of intelligence units and 200 members of the IDF reserve cyber force said that after the Knesset began voting on a bill that prevents the removal of a prime minister for any reason other than physical or mental incapacity and blocks any judicial review of the law, they decided to stop volunteering. The intelligence and cyber reservists are part of a move by reservists from other elite units and Airforce pilots who have warned they wouldn't volunteer if the judicial overhaul, which they say would end Israeli democracy, is completed. [Read More "Ben-Gvir Calls to Dismiss the Attorney General for Acting as 'De Facto Head of the Opposition'" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

## **Senator Wants Biden To Get Tough On Netanyahu**

Senator Chris Murphy, an influential Democratic lawmaker who chairs the Senate subcommittee dedicated to the Middle East, said that the Biden administration should do more to pressure Netanyahu's far-right government and should not rule out steps like conditioning aid to Israel and limiting US visits by senior Israeli officials. "If we're going to continue to be in the business of supporting the Israeli government, they have to be in the continuing business of a future Palestinian state — and that does not seem to be the policy of this government right now," Murphy told CNN's Becky Anderson. "So whether it's conditionality of aid to Israel, whether it's conditionality of visits to the United States, we've got to send a message that this assault on the two-state solution, in particular, is very bad for the US-Israel relationship in the long run," the Connecticut senator continued. [Read More "Democrats Sympathize More with Palestinians Than Israelis, For The First Time" \(Ynet News\)](#)

## **Palestinians: 4 Killed in Israeli Army Raid in West Bank**

Israeli soldiers shot a wanted Palestinian at point-blank range to confirm he is dead in a raid in the West Bank refugee camp of Jenin. Large Israeli army forces entered the refugee camp in search of three Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) members wanted by the security establishment. The raid left four Palestinians dead and 18 others wounded, four critically, the Palestinian Health Ministry reported. The three Palestinians, Nedal Khazem, 28, Yousef Khreim, 29, and Omar Awadin, 16, were shot and killed by Israeli forces. Khazem was related to Ra'ad Hazem, who killed three Israelis in Tel Aviv last year. Video footage from the raid shows the soldiers killed Khazem at point-blank range while he was lying on the ground unarmed. The raid follows an incident near Nablus where the IDF killed three Palestinians after claiming they fired at a patrol. Israeli, Egyptian, and Palestinian officials are holding talks ahead of a planned regional meeting on Sunday in Sharm el-Sheikh in an attempt to prevent further escalation.

## **UAE Allocates \$3 Million to Rebuild Huwara**

The President of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, ordered the allocation of \$3 million for the reconstruction of the village of Huwara in the West Bank, media reported. In late February, dozens of Jewish settlers from the West Bank swept through the Palestinian village and set fire to several scrap yards, damaging cars and causing collateral damage to nearby buildings. The riots were sparked off by the assassination, during a terrorist attack which took place a few hours earlier, of two Israeli brothers Hillel and Yigal Yaniv, aged 22 and 20 years old, respectively. The brothers from the Har Bracha settlement were shot dead while driving through Huwara. The attack was widely condemned by the Israeli political class. The terrorist behind the attack, Abdel Fatah Hussein Khrouchah, a member of the armed wing of Hamas, was killed by Israeli security forces during an operation in the Jenin refugee camp in the West Bank last week.

## Senior Iranian Official Visits UAE on Heels of Saudi Deal

A senior Iranian official visited the UAE just days after Tehran agreed to restore diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia in a [Chinese-brokered deal](#) that raised hopes of a broader rapprochement across the Middle East. Ali Shamkhani, the head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, said his visit was a "meaningful beginning for the two countries to enter a new stage of political, economic and security relations," Iran's state-run IRNA news agency reported. It said he was accompanied by the head of Iran's central bank and other senior officials. He met with the president of the UAE, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and other senior officials to discuss "opportunities for enhancing cooperation between the two countries," the UAE's official WAM news agency reported. Sunni Arab rulers in the Persian Gulf have viewed Iran with suspicion since the 1979 Islamic Revolution toppled a US-allied monarch in Tehran. Relations have worsened since the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, as Shiite-majority Iran has spread its influence across the region and supported powerful armed proxies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and the Palestinian territories. [Read More "Iran to Stop Weapons Shipment to Houthis in Yemen" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

### Reuters

## UN Backs Turkey, Ukraine in Call for 120-Day Grain Deal

The United Nations backed Turkey and Ukraine by calling for a 120-day rollover of an agreement allowing the safe export of grain from several Ukrainian Black Sea ports after Russia said it would only extend the pact for 60 days. The pact is due to expire on Saturday. It was brokered with Russia and Ukraine by the UN and Turkey in July - and renewed in November - to combat a global food crisis that was fueled in part by Russia's Feb. 24, 2022, invasion of neighboring Ukraine and blockade of its Black Sea grain exports. Turkey said that it would continue talks to extend the deal for 120 days rather than 60 days. Ukraine has also said the agreement should be renewed for 120 days. While Russia has not specifically said why it only wants a 60-day renewal, it has complained that its own food and fertilizer exports are being hindered by Western sanctions. To help persuade Russia to allow Ukraine to resume its Black Sea grain exports last year, a three-year deal was also struck in July in which the UN agreed to help facilitate Russian food and fertilizer exports. Western powers have hit Russia with tough sanctions over its invasion of Ukraine. While its food and fertilizer exports are not under sanctions, Moscow says restrictions on payments, logistics and insurance industries are a barrier to such shipments. [Read More "Israel to Advance Arrow 3 Sale to Germany but Won't Arm Ukraine" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## **When Nasrallah Smells Weakness**

By Avi Issacharoff

- **Despite the fact that the gag order on some of the details of the terror attack at Megiddo junction was lifted, most of the information still remains under wraps. We do not know the extent of Hizbullah's involvement in the incident, despite the fact that the immediate suspicion is that the Shiite organization was indeed involved in the operation. When a resident of Lebanon (be he of Palestinian extraction or otherwise) crosses the border equipped with arms and a relatively high-level explosive device, that leaves too many fingerprints that attest to Hizbullah's knowledge about the operation. Nor do we know why the terrorist planted the bomb at Megiddo junction, detonated it there, and why he chose to try to make his way back to Lebanon when he was still in possession of a suicide vest and other weapons.**
- **It could very well be that the fact that the terrorist was found by the security forces in time and was neutralized—or, put in less laundered language, was killed—prevented not only a far higher number of Israel civilian casualties but also prevented an escalation/fighting/war on the Lebanese front, which has been kept quiet since August 2006. This is where the bigger question comes into play: Why did someone in Lebanon choose to escalate tensions with Israel specifically at the current juncture in time? We are just a week away from the beginning of Ramadan.**
- **Given the range of reported incidents in Syria in the past several weeks, a major terror attack in Israel may have been just what would have allowed Hizbullah to take the revenge it has wanted to take on Israel for a long time in response to the attacks in Syria and the assassination of its top officials (dating back from Imad Mughniyah's assassination in 2008). But revenge can't be the only reason for the current timing. Hizbullah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's recent statements would seem to indicate that he believes that the ground beneath Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's feet is shaking.**
- **Nasrallah may truly have come to a conclusion that at the current juncture in time—as the popular protests against the regime coup are gaining tremendous momentum and are twisting Netanyahu's arm—the Israeli prime minister is weaker than ever and would be deterred from setting out on a military adventure, even in the face of a terror attack that was to kill a large number of Israeli civilians. Nasrallah smells blood. He smells Netanyahu's political weakness, and he apparently has concluded that Bibi, who has always been very cautious and conservative on military issues, will be even more cautious at the current juncture in time.**
- **Nasrallah knows that a broad-scale military conflagration with Lebanon will result in Netanyahu being accused by members of the Israeli public of trying to drag the country to war in order to provide himself with an off-ramp from the regime coup. Nasrallah isn't alone on that count. Marwan Issa, who is the deputy of Mohammed Deif, Hamas's military wing in Gaza, or its "chief of staff," issued a highly unusual statement.**

- **Issa, who generally does not speak with the media, said, “Any change in the status quo in al-Aqsa Mosque will produce an earthquake in the region.” Speaking to a Hamas radio station, Issa said, “Giving an opportunity to the resistance in the West Bank does not mean leaving it, and nor does it mean that Gaza will be silent. We will defend our people when intervention is required.” In other words, Hamas has also signaled that it does not intend to ignore any violations at al-Aqsa Mosque during Ramadan. Or, put in simpler terms, if National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir and crew try to hold prayer services on the Temple Mount/Haram Al-Sharif during Passover, that could produce a massive flare-up. Despite the numerous unanswered questions, one thing is becoming increasingly clear: hostilities have already escalated here, possibly on more than just one front, and the Israeli government’s focus on its regime coup isn’t helping to deal with that. On the contrary, it may actually be exacerbating the danger.**

## **Bibi's Word**

By Sima Kadmon

- Even after the president presented a plan, which he had clearly put effort and good intentions into, it must be repeated: there is only one man who can stop this legislation, and that is Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Whether from Rome, Berlin, London, or Jerusalem—one word from him would be enough to alleviate the greatest crisis that the State of Israel has been experiencing since its founding. He and only he can save the State of Israel from itself, and his attempts to look as if he is not dealing with the legislation because of the attorney general's instructions have not made an impression on even his confidants. There is not a single person who doesn't realize that he was involved up to his neck in the president's plan too. Admittedly, if he were to tell Levin to stop the legislation, Levin would pressure him, threaten to resign, and get the Netanyahu family faction in the Likud to avert the evil decree.
- There is no question about this issue; if there is someone whom Netanyahu fears, it's Sara and Yair. And yet, the penny is supposed to drop sometime: does Netanyahu really want to go down in history as the one who led Israel into a constitutional crisis and a civil war? Is he prepared to become a black stain on Israeli history and for all his years in power to be forgotten save for this time, the end of which is unpredictable? The more time goes by, and the dust settles, the more Netanyahu realizes the magnitude of the catastrophe that he has gotten himself into. The social rupture that is still not being called by name, but it is where we have already arrived. Yes, we are already in a civil war; the security services are in a crisis that has just begun; the economy is taking damage that no one understands better than he does; and he is being hazed week after week during his state travels, whether in his speech in the Rome synagogue, with the demonstrations outside his hotel window, and especially in Berlin during his joint press conference with Chancellor Scholz, who did not hide his concern for what's happening to Israeli democracy and who gave Netanyahu a brief lesson in democracy.
- What a disgrace: A German chancellor teaching an Israeli prime minister what democracy is. And all that without mentioning the places to which Netanyahu has not been invited, such as the United States and the United Arab Emirates. The prime minister faced three crossroads on his road to the abyss. The first was the president's plan, which was presented on Wednesday, rejected within minutes by the coalition, and adopted almost immediately by the opposition.
- All the leaders of the opposition delivered a joint statement in order to announce that they endorse the president's plan. Lapid was brief and decisive, calling it a fair compromise, as someone who is firmly convinced that all these attempts at mediation are pointless. Gantz was more romantic, as is his wont, and concerned. He said that it was not an ideal plan, but it is realistic. The opposition did well by endorsing the president's plan. It's preferable for the public to remember that it was the coalition that rejected it.

- It's a shame that the leaders of the coalition parties, particularly the Haredim, did not read the plan with an open mind and genuine curiosity: they would have discovered that their demands were met in everything to do with the conscription bill and Deri's working arrangements. There are quite a few elements that the coalition would have gladly adopted: for example, requiring two-thirds of a panel of eleven justices to strike down legislation. After all, there is not a single country in the world whose Supreme Court requires such a majority to conduct judicial review. Or repealing the grounds of reasonability when appointing nominees, or not allowing basic laws to be overturned, and not giving the justices a veto on the Judges Selection Committee.
- All of that is a big achievement for the conservative camp, which would have jumped on it if it had been offered to them before the election. But power and authority made their appetite grow, turning it into swinishness that knows no bounds. The second crossroads might come as early as next week, around the second and third readings of the anti-democratic bills. Then, before the votes, the prime minister will still be able to halt the process and call on the sides to sit down and talk. The third crossroads will be after the bills pass and the High Court of Justice is petitioned. If the court decides to strike down the laws and argues that the legislation is illegal, it begs the question of whether the government will cave and accept the High Court of Justice's ruling or whether we will face a constitutional crisis, an event the like of which Israel has never experienced, and it is unclear if and how it will emerge from it. These are the crossroads waiting for Netanyahu to stop the regime coup.
- All he has to do is say one word: stop. However, it seems that Netanyahu has been immune to public criticism for quite some time. He simply doesn't care. He lives in his bubble with his family, which is not concerned with alleviating matters, to put it mildly. Quite the contrary. According to the tweets from the crown prince (a title that is closer than ever to becoming a reality), he is making sure to keep his father with open burners and blazing hatred. This leaves the question of what the president will do now, having been rejected by the coalition three times. He sounded alarmed by the coalition's response and announced that it was the start of a dialogue. In this case, as well, the question is how Herzog wants to go down in history: as a president who displayed leadership, who rescued his country in a moment of existential crisis, or as a lawyer, a mediator who considers his role to be a middleman between two sides. Or maybe, when the pressure from the protests mounts, when we really get to the brink of a constitutional crisis, this is the plan that will be back on the table.