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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

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Times of Israel

Coalition Mulls Introducing Changes to Judicial Overhaul

Israeli leaders of the parties in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing coalition convened to discuss ways to modify the judicial overhaul legislation it has been advancing in the face of mass demonstrations and [civil disobedience](#) against the measures. The coalition has barreled ahead with legislation that critics say will destroy Israel's fragile system of checks and balances by concentrating power in the hands of Netanyahu and his Knesset majority, leaving basic civil and human rights unprotected from potential abuse. Warning that it will constitute a shattering blow to Israeli democracy. This is the coalition's first public, unilateral attempt to respond to protesters and legal experts, who have demanded changes to either the content of the reforms or the social polarization created by them. [Read More "Sephardic Chief Rabbi Calls for Judicial Reform Dialogue to Avoid Civil War" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Axios

Biden Urges Netanyahu to Reach Compromise

President Joe Biden spoke on the phone with Netanyahu and expressed his concerns over the judicial overhaul plan, a senior United States official said. It is the first time Biden and Netanyahu have discussed the controversial plan to weaken the Supreme Court. The official said that during the call, Biden expressed concerns "and said, as a friend of Israel, that he hopes a broad consensus can be found around the judicial reform." The White House added that Biden "underscored his belief that democratic values have always been, and must remain, a hallmark of the US-Israel relationship, that democratic societies are strengthened by genuine checks and balances, and that fundamental changes should be pursued with the broadest possible base of popular support." Netanyahu's office stated that "Netanyahu told President Biden that Israel was and will be a strong and [vibrant democracy](#)."

Ha'aretz

Israeli American Wounded in West Bank Shooting

An Israeli American man from the settlement of Itamar was seriously wounded in a shooting attack on his car in the West Bank Palestinian town of Hawara. The Israel Defense Forces are treating the incident as a terrorist attack and apprehended the assailant shortly afterward. IDF sources believe that the shooter arrived on foot with a makeshift gun. [David Stern](#), in his 40s, sustained gunshot wounds to his head and shoulder in the attack on the Route 60 highway. Doctors said his life was not in danger. The victim is a former US Marine who works as a weapons instructor. US Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides confirmed that Stern is also an American citizen. The IDF said the Palestinian terrorist was shot and wounded by both the victim and soldiers. After a brief chase, troops located and detained the gunman, who was taken by medics for treatment before he was to be handed over to the Shin Bet for questioning.

Israel Steps up Security Ahead of Expected Ramadan Unrest

Israeli police said they were stepping up the security measures in preparation for the Palestinian riots widely expected to coincide with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which falls later this week. Israeli officials cited the growing volume of incitement by Palestinian terrorist groups Hamas and [Islamic Jihad](#) as contributing to the likelihood of unrest in the coming weeks. The West Bank has seen a surge in Palestinian violence in recent months, in turn triggering near-daily Israeli military raids. In previous years, Ramadan has typically seen clashes between Israeli police and Palestinians, particularly around the Temple Mount compound in Jerusalem's Old City, a site revered by Muslims as the al-Aqsa Mosque. Ramadan coincides this year with Judaism's Passover and Christian Easter. [Dig Deeper "Sources: Thousands of Officers to Police Palestinian Ramadan Worshipers in Jerusalem" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Netanyahu Government Pledges to Halt Settlement Push

Israel, the US, Jordan, Egypt, and the Palestinian Authority (PA) issued a joint statement in which they said that Israel has pledged not to discuss the construction of new housing units in the settlements for four months and not to approve outposts for six months. According to the statement, drawn up as officials met in the Egyptian resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh, both Israel and the Palestinians have agreed to find ways to ease tensions in the area and pave the way for a "peaceful settlement" between the parties. They have also reaffirmed their commitment to promoting security, stability, and peace for Israelis and Palestinians alike. During the meeting, it was agreed that the parties would establish a mechanism to prevent and control violence, incitement, and inflammatory statements and actions. This mechanism will be evaluated at the next [summit](#), which will take place in April. It was also decided to create a mechanism that will take the necessary measures to enhance the economic conditions of the Palestinian people, as stated in previous agreements, and to improve the financial situation of the PA.

Iraq and Iran Sign Deal to Tighten Border Security

Iraq and Iran signed a [border security agreement](#), a move Iraqi officials said aimed primarily at tightening the frontier with Iraq's Kurdish region, where Tehran says armed Kurdish dissidents pose a threat to its security. The joint security agreement includes coordination in "protecting the common borders between the two countries and consolidating cooperation in several security fields," a statement from the Iraqi prime minister's office said. Iran has also accused Kurdish militants of working with its arch-enemy Israel and has voiced concern over the alleged presence of the Israeli spy agency Mossad in the autonomous Iraqi Kurdish region. Last year, Iran's Intelligence Ministry said a sabotage team detained by its security forces were Kurdish militants working for Israel who planned to blow up a "sensitive" defense industry center in the city of Isfahan. [Read More "Time for Syria to Return to Arab Fold, UAE President Tells Assad During Visit" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Reuters

Iran Proposes Locations to Saudi Arabia for Ministerial Talks

The Iranian government has proposed to Saudi Arabia three locations for a meeting at the foreign minister level, Iran's foreign minister said, citing the latest messages with Riyadh since the countries agreed to re-establish ties. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian told a news conference in Tehran his country had agreed to such a meeting, although he did not list the three locations or say when such a meeting might take place. Separately, an aide to Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said that Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz had invited Raisi to visit Riyadh in a letter welcoming the deal agreed on March 10 to restore ties within two months, after years of hostility. The Saudi government's communications office did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Saudi state media has not reported on the letter. The deal between the region's Sunni Muslim and Shi'ite powers, brokered by China, was announced after four days of previously undisclosed talks in Beijing between top security officials from the two rival Middle Eastern powers. [Dig Deeper "How Iraq Planted the Seeds for China's Saudi-Iran Deal" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Sisi Discusses Nuclear Plant, Grains Trade with Russia

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi held talks with high-ranking Russian officials to discuss a Russian-built nuclear plant under construction on Egypt's north coast as well as grains supply and food security, Egypt's presidency said. The meeting with officials, including Russia's trade minister and a special envoy of President Vladimir Putin, also addressed the establishment of a Russian industrial zone inside the Suez Canal's Economic Zone, among other investments, it added. Construction by Russia's state-owned energy corporation Rosatom of Egypt's first nuclear plant at El Dabaa began in July of last year and is expected to take until at least 2030. In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, [Egypt](#) has been trying to balance long-standing ties with both Russia and Western powers. It is a major importer of Russian wheat and has leaned more heavily on supplies from Russia since the conflict disrupted its grain purchases from Ukraine. [Read More "Turkey's FM to Visit Egypt as Erdogan Mends Relations with Sisi" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Herzog's Outline

By Anshel Pfeffer

- Isaac Herzog's grandly-named "People's Directive" plan, which he presented in the hope of defusing the crisis over the Netanyahu government's judicial overhaul, contained detailed suggestions on how judges in Israel shall be appointed and how many of them will be required to strike down Knesset legislation. But from a political perspective, the most important part of his plan has to do with something completely different. Deep inside the plan are two paragraphs aiming to directly address the two top priorities of Israel's ultra-Orthodox politicians. Both of them are far from coincidental.
- First, there is a passage relating to "an agreed outline for military service or civil-national service legislation," which will be "immune to judicial review." This means, in essence, legitimizing the continued exemption of ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students from military service. Further down the "People's Directive," at the start of the chapter dealing with the "reasonableness standard," which allows the court to intervene in the government's decisions, there's a clause saying that "The decisions of the government in its plenary in matters of policy and appointments of ministers will not be reviewed by a court under the reasonableness standard alone." This can be called "the Arye Dery clause" because it is specifically tailored to allow the return of the twice-convicted Shas leader to Israel's cabinet.
- From the conversations he was having right up until the proposal was revealed, Herzog knew it would be immediately rejected by Justice Minister Yariv Levin. He planted in his plan these two major concessions to the ultra-Orthodox parties, Shas and United Torah Judaism, in the hopes of getting at least part of Netanyahu's coalition on board. So far, it hasn't worked. All the leaders of the coalition parties released a joint statement of rejection. But Herzog isn't the type to give up, and he's still hoping that at least some Shas and UTJ members will start eroding the joint front of refusal.
- Will his concessions to the ultra-Orthodox be enough? Levin's main priority is a hostile takeover of the Judicial Appointments Committee so that he can control the Supreme Court bench. For the Haredim, this is less important. The new ultra-conservative and far-right judges will not be members of their community anyway, and they will still see the court as an alien secular entity. But they badly want to stop the court from acting on the conscription issue and to make sure it cannot again rule against Dery serving in the government.
- In the immediate term, quite slim. The Haredi politicians are still in the power-hungry mode they've been in since the election. They have demanded and received from Netanyahu cabinet and committee positions promises for funding and legislation beyond their wildest dreams. They are still fueled by a burning sense of vengeance for the short period under the Bennett-Lapid government when they were in opposition. The fact that the previous government did nothing of substance to harm the ultra-Orthodox is immaterial. They will have retribution.

- **Their alliance with Netanyahu and the far-right is still solid. But Herzog also believes that there remains a seed of pragmatism in the Haredi leadership. That pragmatism may come to the forefront when the Haredim start to realize that the protest movement against the government, which is only increasing in numbers and determination, is focused not only on protecting the Supreme Court but just as much on the disproportionate influence of the ultra-Orthodox parties.**
- **The Haredi mindset is incapable of absorbing the fact that most Israelis do not see them as a weak minority group. Certainly not when they're a central component of a coalition that seeks to change Israel's character. The Haredi consciousness is still that of an endangered post-Shoah-traumatic community. But a few more protests marches in Bnei Brak, like the ones that took place there last week, and it may start to dawn. It already is among some of the younger and smarter Haredi activists. They will understand that they can't afford an open conflict with the majority of Israeli society. This is the realization Herzog is relying on. It's why he opened the escape hatches in his plan for the exemption of yeshiva students and appointment of convicted ministers.**
- **To break the Haredim away from Levin and his partner-in-crime, far-right lawmaker Simcha Rothman, who heads the Knesset Law and Judiciary Committee. Herzog would love to split the coalition. He tried, even before the election, to lay the foundations for a government in which Benny Gantz would sit with Netanyahu and the ultra-Orthodox, leaving the far-right out. The president still thinks this is possible. Perhaps he also hopes that in the distant future, when his seven-year term is over, he could try once again to become prime minister by reconstructing the alliance between the center-left and the Haredim. The idea seems outlandish, as an entire generation of young Haredim has drifted to the far-right. But Herzog has more than five years left as president to work on that. Meanwhile, he needs to save the Supreme Court.**
- **Still, getting the Haredim to sign on is only half the challenge. Even if he can convince them to show some pragmatism, he can't necessarily assume that the opposition and the protest movement would automatically agree to a formula whereby the price of saving the Supreme Court is to formally accept the fact that their children will serve in the military, while the Haredi ones will remain in Yeshiva. That's a lot to ask in return for the Haredim leaving Israeli democracy alone. Now that the "secular revolt" has broken out on the streets of Israel, it may prove impossible to turn back the clock.**

No Trust

By Nahum Barnea

- We'd been spoiled. In the pre-Rothman and pre-Levin Israel, there were certain things that we took for granted that can't be taken for granted anymore. Everyone who has attended the demonstrations is familiar with the list: democracy, the rule of law, the gatekeepers, a single army, and an independent and apolitical judiciary. Something else ought to be added to that respectable list: the United States. The cloud that is hanging over Israel's relationship with America isn't being felt yet in every Israeli household, and it's a good thing that that is the case, but it is keenly being felt in the Prime Minister's Bureau, the Defense Minister's Bureau and in all parts of the Israeli security establishment. All of those people have very good reasons to be afraid.
- The anti-democratic legislation and the protests against it have produced several surprises. The revolution's scope and extremism came as a surprise; the unbelievable number of new bills (124) came as a surprise; the insolence, corruption, and tenacity that has been shown by the people spearheading the coup as they push ahead in defiance of the wishes of most voters came as a surprise; even more surprising was the scope of the protests, the protestors' perseverance and high turnout among younger Israelis. Israel has never experienced a coup of this kind; it has never experienced a protest of this kind, either.
- Joe Biden's plate is full of domestic and foreign affairs. He currently has no interest in opening a front against the Israeli government over the government's policies in the territories and certainly not over its efforts to weaken the democratic institutions in Israel. He has found a way of his own to punish Netanyahu: a restraining order. Netanyahu has been waiting eagerly for an invitation to Washington, but no such invitation has been issued. Two phone conversations were held—maybe three, including the one held last night. That's all. Netanyahu has never experienced that kind of alienation, not even from presidents such as Clinton and Obama, despite the subversive action he took against them in their own backyard in Washington. America, his second homeland, is shut to him. Without the White House, there can be no [meetings with] AIPAC, Congress, evangelists, or Jews. Netanyahu gazes out and sees America, but he is unable to visit.
- We have all followed with some bemusement the travel lust that has gripped Netanyahu: first Rome, then Berlin, and now London. Some people view them as untimely vacations; others perceive them as acts of escape. But those trips might also be construed as compensation: since he is being denied the opportunity to travel to America, he has chosen to visit countries that are prepared to receive him. Prepared for the time being, at least. Regardless of the American context, the Israeli prime minister is a far less desired guest in global capitals, a far less attractive guest. All that has happened while Israel and the United States are preparing for possible military action against Iran. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin paid a quick visit to Israel, as did Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley.

- IAF pilots have been training alongside American pilots in Nevada. That activity has been ongoing because the administration currently has an interest in showing the Iranians that the military option is on the table. According to one source, Austin presented to Israel a plan for a joint operation. The same source said that Netanyahu rejected that plan, perhaps justly so. All Israeli prime ministers have been leery of joint plans with the Americans for fear that at the moment of truth, the American president might halt the operation. The American embrace could prove to be a bear hug. At junctures of this kind, relations of trust between the president and the prime minister are of tremendous importance. Quiet and discreet understandings can be reached on issues from Iran to Ramallah in one-on-one conversations in the Oval Office.
- Netanyahu tried last night to persuade Biden that he and his government are bowing on the Palestinian issue across the board. He is unlikely to have persuaded the president. Currently, not only is there no trust, but there is also no willingness in Washington to hide the lack of trust. If there is any deliberation in the White House on that issue, it is deliberation whether the time hasn't come to have their criticism of Netanyahu and his government take on a more palpable form. Netanyahu would like to separate the issues. Just as he said at the beginning of the cabinet meeting, Iran on its own, terrorism on its own, and anarchy—which is how he described the protests—on its own. But that separation lives only in his own imagination.
- The following is also a surprise, a huge surprise: everyone who has headed an Israeli security apparatus in the past twenty years, everyone who was appointed to that job by Netanyahu, has signed a petition against the anti-democratic initiative in the past few weeks. Three of them explained their decision to do so in high-profile interviews: Tamir Pardo and Nadav Argaman to Ilana Dayan on Uvda; Zeev Snir in an interview with Nadav Eyal in Yedioth Ahronoth. The sensitivity that retired senior security officials have shown with respect to the fortitude of Israel's democratic regime is admirable. It seems, however, that they are equally troubled by two ancillary developments.
- The first is the signs of revolt by officers and reservists in the most elite of the IDF's units, and the second is the erosion of Israel's military alliance with the United States. They know something that Israelis tend to repress: there is no way of stopping Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons without America's help. That begins with international support for Israeli operations and ends with refueling planes, munitions, and spare parts. There is a clear and worrisome connection between Israel's ability to stop and deter Iran and the regime coup being advanced by Levin, Rothman, Netanyahu, and Deri. The more the coup advances, the more deterrence recedes. That could also be put as follows: the more Israel comes to resemble Iran in terms of its regime, the weaker it becomes in its war against Iran. Sometimes it's that simple.