



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and Middle East News Update

Friday, March 31

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News Excerpts

March 31, 2023

Ynet News

Supporters of Judicial Overhaul March in Tel Aviv

Tens of thousands of Israeli supporters of the government and its planned judicial overhaul gathered for what they called 'a Freedom March' in Tel Aviv after calls from ministers for the right-wing public to take to the streets in response to mass demonstrations held for the past three months, by opponents of the plan. Demonstrators carried signs, some saying "Bibi is the king of Israel," "the left-wing minority does not decide," and "The Supreme Court will not rule us," while some chanted calls for Chief Justice Esther Hayut to resign. On Monday, the right-wing staged its first 15,000-strong demonstration in Jerusalem as a show of force prompted by the government and parties in the coalition and were outside the Knesset to hear Netanyahu's announcement.

Israel Hayom

Cohen: Reform 'Will Be Reached through Compromise'

Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen has begun talks with senior **United States** officials with regard to Israel's highly contested judicial reform and assured them that the legislation will be reached "through dialogue and negotiations." Cohen spoke with Sen. Lindsey Graham, one of Israel's biggest supporters in Congress, and is expected to talk with Secretary of State Antony Blinken. In his talk with Graham, Cohen reportedly stressed the need for "broad national consensus. We are facing a great challenge of restoring public trust in Israeli democracy." Cohen issued the following statement: "There is dialogue aimed at reaching an agreement, but we are in any case committed to passing the reform that would strengthen Israel's democracy." [Read More "New York Republican: Biden's Hostile Comments toward Israel Are Shameful" \(Arutz Sheva\)](#)

Associated Press

Israel's Palestinians Mostly Sit Out Democracy Protests

As minorities long plagued by systemic discrimination, Palestinian-Israelis have potentially the most to lose if the plan, which would likely weaken the judiciary's independence, is implemented. But the community harbors a deep sense that the system is already rigged against it and always has been — and sees the demonstrations as an exclusively Jewish movement unwilling to include issues that matter to Palestinians and blind to the longstanding injustices against them. The hallmarks of the movement have only reinforced for Palestinian-Israelis that there is no place for them: the ubiquitous Star of David flag, the national anthem about the yearning of the Jewish soul for Israel, and the heavy participation of former officials from the military, an institution Palestinian citizens view with suspicion. Organizers say they have repeatedly invited Arab-Israelis to participate but are keeping their message focused tightly on the overhaul. [Read More "Crime Soars in Arabs Communities" \(The Media Line\)](#)

Two Settlers Arrested Indicted for Terrorism in Huwara

Two Israelis who live in Samaria (West Bank) have been arrested for attacking Palestinians with an ax and stones in Huwara on Purim, the Israel Police and the Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency) said. The suspects were identified as Hanoch Rabin, a resident of Givat Ronen, and Raz Giron, a resident of Yitzhar. An indictment was filed against the two, charging them with crimes of conspiracy to commit a terrorist act of aggravated damage and willful damage to a vehicle for racist reasons. They belong to a group that works to harm Palestinians and disrupt Israeli security forces, the police, and Shin Bet said. During the riots on Purim, a group of about 10 Israelis entered Huwara and began attacking Palestinians. In one instance, the group noticed a Palestinian family from Qibliya in a car outside a supermarket and began throwing stones at the car. They also hit the shoulder and hand of one of the occupants with an ax through the window. During the attack, the Israelis shouted, "Death to Arabs," according to the indictment.

Thousands Commemorate Land Day in Israel, Gaza

Thousands rallied across Israel and the Palestinian territories for Land Day. Two people have been wounded by Israeli army fire during a march in the blockaded Gaza Strip. At the main rally in Sakhnin, an Arab city in northern Israel, journalists saw many people wearing the traditional keffiyeh scarf as they waved Palestinian flags and chanted: "Freedom! Freedom!" Land Day commemorates protests and a strike on March 30, 1976, against a decision by the Israeli authorities to seize large sections of land in the northern Galilee region. Israeli police fired at demonstrators, killing six people, and the government plan was subsequently annulled. Arab citizens, who constitute around 20% of Israel's population, have remained there after the war that coincided with the creation of Israel in 1948. In Gaza, under a crippling Israeli-led blockade since 2007, hundreds marched along the heavily guarded border.

Delegates From the Gulf, Africa in Israel to Discuss Links

More than 20 guests from different Arab Gulf and African countries arrived in Israel for a historic visit to Jerusalem, where they will discuss a range of issues that pertain to regional links with the Jewish state. Among these guests, some of whom were from countries with which Israel does not have diplomatic relations, were representatives of think tanks, institutes of applied diplomacy, and journalists. They participated in a three-day conference initiated by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, focused on Israel's relations with the countries of Africa and the Gulf region. Representatives of Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Djibouti, Tunisia, Mauritania, and Sudan - states that do not have diplomatic relations with Israel - were among those at the forum, as well as envoys from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Chad, Ethiopia, Ghana, Jordan, Kenya, Morocco, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Somaliland, South Africa, South Sudan, and Uganda. [Read More "US Diplomat: Arab Leaders Worried About Unrest in Israel" \(I24 News\)](#)

HRW Chief: Israel Is on 'Rampage' Against Human Rights

Israel's government is "on a rampage" against human rights, the new head of Human Rights Watch (HRW) said and urged the US and other allies to do more to hold it accountable for alleged abuses and persuade it to change course. A planned overhaul of the judiciary by Israel's religious-nationalist government would be "a disaster" for human rights, HRW Executive Director Tirana Hassan said. She called on Washington to follow through after it issued a rare reproach over the move. "With the current state of the Israeli government and the attacks on the judiciary in particular, we see that this is not a human rights-compliant government," Hassan said. "This is a government that's actually on a rampage against human rights domestically against its own people in Israel..." The chief spokesman for Israel's Foreign Ministry, Lior Haiat, said: "This is an amazing example of how biased she and the organization are. Human Rights Watch labeled Israel's treatment of Palestinians and the decades-long Israeli occupation of the West Bank as "apartheid" in a 2021 report. Some pro-Israel groups, including prominent Jewish organizations in the US, have said HRW and other rights groups have shown bias against Israel in their reporting. [Read More "Judicial Battle Distracting Israel From Fighting West Bank Violence – Top US Official" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Syria Accuses Israel of Airstrikes for Second Night in a Row

The Israeli Air Force carried out airstrikes in the Syrian capital Damascus, for the second night in a row, according to Syria's state-run media outlet. The state news agency SANA reported that Syria's air defenses intercepted the "hostile missiles" over the capital, though the "aggression" managed to cause some material damage. Damascus regularly claims to successfully intercept IDF strikes, but military analysts doubt these assertions. There were no immediate reports of injuries in the strike. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition war monitor, said the strikes targeted an arms depots for government forces and Iran-backed groups just south of Damascus. Footage circulating on social media showed explosions in the sky, apparently from Syrian air defense missiles. Less than 24 hours earlier, SANA said that the IAF targeted sites in Damascus, wounding two soldiers and causing material damage. The conditions of the two soldiers were not immediately clear. In recent years, numerous Syrian soldiers serving in air defense units have been killed in Israeli airstrikes. In January, the Syrian army said Israel's military fired missiles toward the Damascus International Airport, putting it out of service temporarily and killing two soldiers. That attack came amid Israeli fears the Damascus airport was being used for funneling Iranian weaponry into the country.

Biden No Longer Trusts Netanyahu, but Herzog and Gantz Refuse to See the Red Flags

By Uri Misgav

- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is not fit for office – not from a security and legal standpoint, not in view of his conduct, and quite possibly not due to his health and emotional state as well. It's over. At the beginning of the week, he fired Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, a Likudnik, for seeking to stop the governmental coup and for asking to convene the security cabinet to consider a clear and concrete threat to the security of Israel and Israelis. In other words, Gallant was doing his job. Initially, it was said that Gallant was fired for speaking out while Netanyahu was on vacation in London. Half an hour later, it was said that he hadn't properly dealt with the threat by reservists to refuse to serve due to the judicial overhaul.
- The spontaneous protest that swept Israel the night of Gallant's dismissal also made it clear that the Netanyahu era is over and that Israel won't be a dictatorship. "Where were you on March 26?" will become a question for the history books, like the assassinations of JFK and of Prime Minister Rabin. When I marched in protest with my young son on Tel Aviv's Ayalon highway that night, which was shut down and teeming with patriotic Israelis, I was choked up and teary-eyed. I told my son that there wouldn't be school the following day, but that's not awful. This was the best civics and history lesson that he would ever have. And that is actually what happened.
- The following morning there was a general strike and rallies from the liberal democratic camp in Jerusalem and in other cities and highway junctions, followed that evening by the highly organized demonstration by far-right religious Zionists in support of the government. Non-religious Likudniks (without kippot) weren't there, nor were ultra-Orthodox demonstrators. The non-religious Likudniks simply aren't enthusiastic about taking to the streets for the Netanyahu family, and a considerable portion of them also oppose a unilateral government coup. And the ultra-Orthodox didn't receive orders from their community's leading rabbis.
- Those who did show up at the Knesset and on Kaplan Street in Tel Aviv and at the Tel Yosef junction in the north were pro-Netanyahu thugs and La Familia terrorists who were armed and masked. The prime minister waited for them to sow the final chaos that would enable him to announce a "halt to the legislation" and "dialogue." The payoff to National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir was the creation of a national guard under his command – in other words, a state militia through which those same rioters can continue to deal with Arabs and leftists. The consolation is the knowledge that the fate of the national guard will be the same as the "reconciliation cabinet" that Benny Gantz was promised when he entered a coalition government with Netanyahu and as the "housing cabinet" that Netanyahu promised to establish within a month of the last election. Everything else was a chronicle foretold. President Isaac Herzog announced that the President's Residence was open for "dialogue" and a "wide consensus."

- **And at the speed of light, Gantz, the leader of the National Unity party, tweeted: “Israel before anything else!” He also announced that he would show up for the negotiations. At that point, Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid and the other opposition parties had no choice but to follow suit. Herzog specializes in safeguarding Netanyahu for unity’s sake, and Gantz did a doctorate in rescuing Netanyahu just before the knockout. They have very personal political interests as well, perhaps as national ones. It doesn’t matter. The result is a farce. Turning Israel into a dictatorship by broad consensus isn’t within the president’s authority. Beyond the stone walls and heavy wooden doors, the chaos continues to run rampant, along with the fake news and the violence. Enough with this harmful humiliation. Herzog labeled the most moving civic protest in Israel’s history – in which hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children took to the streets to defend democracy – “difficult scenes.” Why difficult? Moving scenes. Determined scenes.**
- **A huge number of people approached me at each of the protests of the past two months with the same frightened question: Tell me, Gantz won’t do this to us again. Right? My response was the same: The liberal democratic camp has been reborn. No one will manage to put this genie back in the bottle. Within a day, even the Biden administration understood what Herzog and Gantz and their associates refuse to understand. It’s over, and in any event, it’s impossible to believe a word coming out of Netanyahu’s mouth. This is a repeat of 1948 for us. We can be permitted to rest for a few days. There were also lulls in the fighting in 1948 in Israel’s War of Independence. And then we will need to continue on with full force – until we win.**

‘Israel, Exactly Like Nowhere Else’ Is More Than Just a Tourism Slogan These Days

By Joanna Landau

- About a month ago, Israel’s Ministry of Tourism launched a new campaign with the slogan: “Israel, Exactly Like Nowhere Else.” Considering everything going on in our country in the last three months, one could argue this slogan is reflective of a lot more than just Israel’s unique tourism offering. The world’s eyes are upon the Jewish state as we – like Hungary and Poland – begin to slide down a slippery slope that can potentially lead to an autocratic regime with a notably centralized set of authorities. But just as the slogan implies, we are EXACTLY like nowhere else in this respect too.
- The modern state that was established in the aftermath of one of humanity’s most terrible eras, the country that introduced the world to the Kibbutz, absorbed a million and a half Russians in a matter of months in the ’90s, and established one of the world’s leading innovation-based economies, is at it again. In this instance, the people are remarkably perceptive, rising nearly as one to proclaim their dissatisfaction of turning the holy land into a quasi-dictatorship, and global media outlets, both on and offline, are more than eager to syndicate this struggle all over the world.
- Nadav Eyal, one of Israel’s leading journalists and author of the bestselling book “Revolt,” recently tweeted: “I speak to friends around the world. From Asia to Poland. They are in awe of the Israeli people’s battle for freedom, for democracy... It is almost unclear to them. Why business associations and members of the security industry should act this way. We were established as a democracy, I tell them. Democracy is at our core. It was part of the First Zionist Congress. We were the first country in the world established by democratic institutions... it is our local tradition.” And this, in a nutshell, is what the world is seeing and following.
- Globally-spanning news reports are showing hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens across the country taking to the streets, waving the Israeli flag, brandishing a variety of creative plaques, and manifesting their concern through visually disruptive displays, such as the Handmaid’s Tale silent marches led by the women’s organization, Bonot Alternativa (“Building an Alternative”). And all – almost without a hint of violence.
- Many Israelis, understandably, are deeply concerned for how this is impacting Israel’s global image. In 2022, Israel was ranked the 10th most powerful country in the world in the Best Countries index, published by the US News & World Report. The index reflects the perceptions of around 20,000 global citizens towards countries in various areas. The “Power” category measures how people perceive a country’s independence, leadership, military might, economic strength, and international relations. Israel was seen to have very powerful international standing, especially on a government-to-government level. However, in stark contrast to this, Israel’s overall ranking, which measures the country’s “soft power” (quality of life, culture and heritage, entrepreneurship, etc.), was only 37th out of 78 countries, a dramatic drop of 7 places from the previous year.

- In all but the Power category (without which we would have ranked even lower), Israel underperformed, while in terms of Power, it punched way above its weight. Fast forward just a year later, and the tables have turned: Biden's administration is expressing very un-American-like concern (in other words, blunt and direct) for events unfolding in Israel; Sunak, the British Prime Minister, avoided the traditional photo-op during Netanyahu's recent visit; Israel's military is falling victim to the public sentiment, and our economy is suffering.
- All of these deficiencies and mishaps are noticeably compromising Israel's "hard power" rating. But while this is happening, the tables may be turning in other, more positive, respects as well; For years, Israel has had to work hard to try to convince the world that we have the same values as other Western democracies. The reason for this was notably hostile depictions of Israel by less-than-friendly organizations, chief among them being the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement. Regardless of how Israel looks at these organizations, they do possess some clout.
- Now, as at least half of the population is fighting to maintain the democratic nucleus at the heart of the Israeli ethos, the world is, in fact seeing our democracy in action – in 3D and technicolor, on their TVs and smartphones, every day. We may be heading towards a new era for Israel's global image, one that is led more by the people and less by the government alone. That would cement the impression that Israeli fortitude does not necessarily come from its government or military but rather stems from the spirit of its people, regardless of which coalition has a majority in the Knesset at any given time.
- In so many ways, Israel really is exactly like nowhere else in the world. We began by simply following the global trend to become more right-leaning. Yet, in a surprising twist, perhaps due to an overzealous and careless right-wing pivot, it will be Israel that will showcase what a true democracy looks and feels like and hold strong. Of so many countries in the world that have been unable to stem the tide of quasi-fascistic tendencies, Israel might be the showcase for how it's done correctly. That, in itself, will introduce a whole new Israel. The kind that will be much easier to market in front of a wary world.