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## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Friday, May 26*

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# News Excerpts

May 26, 2023

Arutz Sheva

## **Poll: Coalition Didn't Gain Support After Passing Budget**

A new poll conducted by Ma'ariv showed that the passage of the Israeli State budget did not lead to increased support for the coalition parties. According to the poll, both the Likud party and the National Unity party would win 27 Knesset seats, with Yesh Atid coming in second-largest with 18 seats. The third-largest party in the Knesset would be Shas, with nine seats, followed by United Torah Judaism, with seven seats. Three parties would win six seats each: Religious Zionism, Hadash-Ta'al, and Yisrael Beytenu, and Otzma Yehudit and Meretz would win five each. Ra'am (United Arab List) would be the smallest party in the Knesset, with just four. Divided into blocs, the coalition parties would receive 54 of the Knesset's 120 seats - the same as in the last poll - while the center-left would receive 60 seats. The remaining six seats are held by the Arab Hadash-Ta'al party, which does not join any coalition.

Times of Israel

## **PM to Seek Changes to Legal System if Overhaul Talks Fail**

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will reportedly pursue shakeups of the State Attorney's Office and the Attorney General's Office if his coalition's negotiations with the opposition on judicial reform fall apart. Rather than working to ensure the government has control over the Judicial Appointments Committee, a key part of the government's overhaul plans, a senior official told Channel 13 that Netanyahu will instead focus his attention on the two offices that play an essential role in deciding what criminal cases are opened. The report did not specify what changes Netanyahu would seek at the State Attorney's Office and the Attorney General's Office. Netanyahu was said to recognize that he needs a contingency plan if the negotiations with the opposition fail, as he will likely come under significant pressure from his base to pass some sort of judicial legislation.

Ha'aretz

## **Israel Approves Settlers' Groundwork in Homesh**

Israeli settlers began preparing the groundwork on state-owned land in the West Bank outpost of Homesh to relocate a yeshiva established on privately owned Palestinian land. The works are carried out without permits and are against the law. Initially, soldiers stationed at the outpost prevented the settlers from bringing engineering tools to the area. However, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who holds the settlement's portfolio in the defense ministry, intervened, instructing the army to allow the use of an excavator to level the ground. The Shomron Regional Council obtained permission from the Civil Administration, Israel's governing body in the West Bank, to plan construction in Homesh. [Read More "University Heads Denounce Coalition Bill Banning Display of Palestinian Flags" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## **Nasrallah Says Israel Cannot Threaten Hezbollah with War**

Iran-backed Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said that Israel cannot threaten his organization with war. "We are threatening you, and such a war will include the borders of Israel." The Islamist leader spoke on the occasion of "Resistance and Liberation Week, marking 23 years since the IDF pulled back from Lebanon, adding, "Anyone who thinks the battle is over is delusional because part of our country is still occupied." "The enemy is the one who must be careful not to make mistakes because the big war will bring about its death," he said. Nasrallah spoke days after the IDF military chief warned Hezbollah was beginning to forget the lessons of the Second Lebanon War, and the bomb planted by a terrorist who crossed the Lebanon border into Israel was not an isolated event. Referring to the recent cycle of fighting in Gaza, the Shi'ite leader said Israeli threats came after Israel failed to secure a victory. [Read More "IDF Downs Drone Crossing to Israel From Lebanon" \(Ynet News\)](#)

## **Iran Tests Ballistic Missile Capable of Hitting Israel**

Iran said that it had "successfully test-fired" a [precision-guided ballistic missile](#) with a range of 1,250 miles, capable of carrying multiple warheads as far as Israel and evading "enemy" radars. The Kheibar missile is an upgraded version of its ancestor, the Khorramshahr, which was unveiled in 2017, according to the state-linked Tasnim news agency. "It is one of the most advanced missiles ever designed by experts at the Aerospace Department of the Defense Ministry," Tasnim stated. Detailing other features of the 13-meter-long missile, Iranian media also said it adjusts its trajectory outside the atmosphere and has a launch time of less than 12 minutes. The launching ceremony was led by Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani and broadcast live on state television. [Read More "US Warns of 'Serious Threat' After Iran Unveils New Ballistic Missile" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## **Russian Gold Shipments to the UAE, China and Turkey**

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has become a key trade hub for Russian gold since Western sanctions over Ukraine cut Russia's more traditional export routes, Russian customs records show. The records, which contain details of nearly a thousand gold shipments between Feb. 24, 2022, and March 3 this year, reveal the names of over 100 non-Russian companies that have handled Russian gold since Western markets banned imports from Moscow. The shipments in the records, supplied to Reuters by a commercial provider, may not cover all exports in the period. In many cases, the records show only shippers or traders involved in the transaction, not the end buyer, which could be a refiner, jeweler, or investor. According to the customs records, a handful of Russian shipments arrived in London after the Ukraine war started but before Western import bans kicked in. [Dig Deeper "From Russia with Gold: UAE Cashes in as Sanctions Bite" \(Reuters\)](#)

## **Dubai Police Arrest Eight After Murder of Israeli**

A 32-year-old Israeli man, identified as 32-year-old Gasan Shamsiya from Acre, was stabbed to death in Dubai, according to the Israeli Foreign Ministry. The man was a resident of Acre. An investigation was immediately launched into the circumstances surrounding his death, and Ma'ariv reported that the background for the murder was most likely a family dispute. According to the Maariv report, Shamsiya fled to Dubai as a result of a dispute between two families in Israel, but members of rival families were waiting for him there and murdered him. Local police in Dubai arrested eight men, all Israeli, within less than 24 hours. According to police, the eight suspects arrived in the UAE from a European country. The suspects are still awaiting arraignment. The ongoing investigation is being conducted in coordination with the Israeli police. It is unclear whether any Israeli law enforcement officials are taking an active part in the investigation in the UAE, but the detainees will not be extradited to Israel. [Dig Deeper "Dubai Police Arrest Eight Israelis Over Fatal Stabbing of Compatriot" \(Ynet News\)](#)

## **Israeli Man Missing for 2 Years Found in Jordan, Repatriated**

Shalom Rotban, a 27-year-old resident of Kiryat Malachi in southern Israel who went missing about two years ago, was found in Jordan and returned to Israel. His repatriation was done with the help of Israel's President Isaac Herzog, the Consulate in Jordan, IDF forces, and the Israeli Foreign Ministry. At the beginning of May, Rotban was found by Jordanian residents walking on a road near Amman. They took him to a psychiatric hospital, where a nurse realized he was Israeli. His family was then contacted and told that he had been found safe and sound. His family tried unsuccessfully to send him back to Israel with a volunteer organization that helps locate missing persons. Israel's High Court issued an urgent appeal to Herzog's team to personally intervene to repatriate Rotban ahead of the Shavuot holiday, which begins tonight. Herzog's team worked with the Jordanian Royal Palace team, which immediately became involved in assisting with his return to Israel. Rotban was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder after a rocket fell near his home in 2012, killing three people. Since then, his mental state had deteriorated.

## **Netanyahu on His Way to Mohammed**

By Nahum Barnea

- Call this a dirty trick, call it the deal of the century, or call it realpolitik, what has been happening in the last few weeks in the Washington-Riyadh-Jerusalem triangle undermines some of the holiest conventions in the Middle East. One vertex of this triangle is President Biden—to be more precise, his national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and CIA Director William Burns. The three left a few months ago on a shuttle whose goal was to restore relations between the US administration and the Saudi royal palace. There were reasons aplenty: Saudi Arabia must not be allowed to fall into China's net, seeing as China is the Biden administration's greatest rival; it must not be allowed to fall into Iran's net. Biden will tell his voters that America is not fleeing the Middle East—it is leading it peacefully without endangering a single American soldier.
- The second vertex is Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia. He is 37, bold, decisive, arrogant, unpredictable, and unstable—in short, he is everything we thought we knew about this kingdom that we long for, but the opposite. At his inspiration, or on his instructions, the journalist Jamal Khashoggi was murdered five years ago, and his body dismembered. The victim was an American citizen [sic]. His articles appeared in the Washington Post. MBS became the most hated ruler by the Democrats in Washington, on par with Putin and Trump. Mohammed bin Salman has money; he also has time. He had preferred to wait for the elections in America next November and Trump's possible return to the White House. In the meantime, he has padded the seat of Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, with billions of dollars, an advance on a future bill. But Sullivan pressured, and bin Salman acceded.
- He posed two and a half demands to the Biden administration: first, an arms deal that will give Saudi Arabia the most advanced toys in the American arsenal, everything that Trump promised Mohammad bin Zayed, the acting ruler of the Emirates, and lots more. F-35 planes, the cherry on top, would be part of the deal. The second far-reaching demand: the establishment of a facility to enrich uranium that will bring Saudi Arabia into the nuclear club. Like all the countries in the region, Saudi Arabia also says that it wants this only for peaceful purposes. The half-demand relates to the Palestinians.
- According to one version, MBS inserted the Palestinians into the negotiations only to prove that he demands more than MBZ. According to another version, he was willing to forgo the Palestinians, but the demand came from the White House: Biden knows that it will be very hard for him to persuade the Democrats to accept the Saudi prince's demands. He must serve it to Congress Mary Poppins- style, with a spoonful of sugar. The spoonful is a resounding concession that the Israeli government will make to the Palestinian Authority (PA), perhaps a resumption of the peace process, perhaps freezing settlements, perhaps both. The White House needs another concession from Israel, unrelated to the Saudis but strongly related to the mindset of the Democratic factions in both houses of Congress: freezing the judicial revolution.

- **Netanyahu acceded: the protest in the streets had forced him to freeze the legislation in any case. He also sold this to the ratings companies, to the Israelis and to the White House. Netanyahu, today, is fully invested, as he knows how to be, in promoting the Saudi venture. He believes that he will resolve most of his problems, domestic and external. The doors to the White House will once again be open to him; the voters who abandoned him will return and will re-envelop him in the aura of the all-powerful, captivating leader, a leader who enjoys a consensus. Israel and Saudi Arabia, shoulder to shoulder against Iran. The Abraham Accords will pale against the Binyamin Accords. One big step for Israel, one giant leap for Netanyahu.**
- **There is only one small obstacle on the way to victory: the composition of the government that he heads does not sit well with concessions to the Palestinians or with freezing settlement. Smotrich and Ben Gvir are liable to dismantle the government. Lapid and Gantz will find it difficult to take their place; not as long as Netanyahu is charged with criminal offenses. Normalization with Saudi Arabia could give rise to many things. It could make an offensive strike by Israel on Iran easier, a strike that Netanyahu often hints to and in whose preparation the IDF is investing a great deal; it could give rise to a new stream of investments that will lead Israel out of recession; it could breathe new life into the Saudi peace plan.**
- **Alternatively, it could give rise to much less: we have to remember that Israel is a secondary partner to the deal, neither the bride nor the groom. Saudi Arabia's weapons and nuclear demands do not conform to Israel's interests. The Saudi prince is trying to normalize relations with everyone—with America, with Israel, with China, and with Iran. The story of the deal was first reported here on February 3 this year, after a first round of feelers was put out by high-ranking American officials. The basic data that I described at the time have not changed: Netanyahu's enthusiasm, Biden's constraints, and the prince's impudence. The process has since ripened. An event of this magnitude usually has political consequences.**
- **Elections following an agreement are one possibility; a plea bargain agreement is another possibility. In June 1986, then-president Chaim Herzog granted a pardon to the GSS director, Avraham Shalom, and to senior GSS agents who were responsible for the bus 300 affair. The pardon was given to those who had murdered two handcuffed terrorists (Palestinians) and who had lied to the committee that investigated the affair. The pardon was given before a trial was held, a ploy that left an indelible stain on the Supreme Court and on the institution of the presidency. If a post-trial pardon could be swallowed by the Supreme Court justices, then a pardon during a trial will also be acceptable. The French call this *raison d'état*: what is good for the state is good for its values. It could be that I'm being overly pessimistic, but the possibility of the following end result should not be ruled out: Netanyahu will write a lovely letter in which he will express regret for the trouble caused to him by the justice system in Cases 1,000, 2,000, and 4,000. The president will say a few nice words praising his regret and in praise of unity, and the story will be over.**

- **“No such thing,” says a senior official. “In the Middle East, everyone now talks to everyone. Israel talks to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the Emirates; Saudi Arabia talks to Iran, Israel, and Syria; the Emirates talk to Iran and Israel; the Americans talk to Iran, the Emirates, and Israel; China talks to Saudi Arabia and Israel; Russia talks to Iran, Syria, and Israel. Nobody knows who closed a deal with whom and about what. We’ve become Qatar.” Qatar, the small oil emirate on the shore of the Persian Gulf, sticks a finger, for good or for bad, in everything that happens in the Middle East. Its sworn enemies are its most satisfied customers—the US, Iran, Israel, Hamas, and others. Each receives a little and gets criticized a little. “The Qatar-ization of the Middle East,” intelligence experts call this. Less euphemistic descriptions could also be used, of course. They used to have communal showers in the kibbutzim. There was a hole in the wall at a certain height. Three women peeked through it. That’s not my husband, said one. That’s right, he’s not your husband, the second woman confirmed. He’s not from this kibbutz, the third woman said.**
- **The regional picture converges into other fateful phenomena. 1 – The Arab Spring, which erupted to cheers 12 years ago, is dead and gone. Its final act was this month, with Syria’s return to the Arab League. 2 – America has withdrawn from the region, but its shadow remains. 3 – The Trump administration’s withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran was a mistake of historic proportions. The economic sanctions failed. A joint Iran-Russia axis was formed, whose ramifications affect the war in Ukraine. Netanyahu, who pushed America to withdraw, bears some of the responsibility. Iran is close to the bomb. The secret operations attributed to Israel have not made Iran divert from its path. Out of all the assassinations, the most significant was that of Qasem Soleimani, which was by the Americans. The Revolutionary Guards are finding it hard to recover and rehabilitate the command ranks. In their distress, they are flooding Syria and Lebanon with weapons and ammunition.**

## **Talking to Hamas**

By Jacky Hugi

- On rare occasions, we encounter a diplomatic opportunity that can change the balance of power in the Middle East if we know how to capitalize on it. That is what happened in 1977 when Sadat embarked on the journey to peace with Israel. That is also what happened in 1993, when the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) under Yasser Arafat, beaten and battered from the first Intifada and the Arabs' alienation, agreed to recognize Israel and pursue a peace agreement with it. In the Egyptian case, the opportunity that pounded on our door was the fruit of the military tumult that had preceded it. With Arafat, the foundations for the breakthrough had been laid surreptitiously by mediators.
- A diplomatic opportunity has been placed before us today as well, but unlike these two previous cases, it has been concealed with noise and masks. A window of opportunity to speak with Hamas and strive to reach a solution with it in the Gaza Strip has emerged. Should Israel wish, it is likely to find openness on the other side. This initiative looks like a horrifying step for many Israelis, but this is about taking preemptive action. Leaving the status quo intact could be more dangerous. It will take a year or two, maybe four or five. However, in the near future, the race for the leadership of the Palestinian people will begin again. Hamas has a good starting position and many advantages. Israel has been given a chance to decide what kind of Hamas it will be: an enemy or a partner.
- The range of Israel's other choices regarding Hamas is shrinking. We lost the privilege of reinstating the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the Gaza Strip after it was thrown out in a military coup. The PA is too weak to carry out the mission. Hamas can be deposed, and the Gaza Strip can be reoccupied, but who wants to deal with the sewage and transportation needs of two million strangers? That leaves the third option: coming to an arrangement in Gaza.
- Not a peace treaty but a truce arrangement between neighbors, acknowledging the reality that Hamas is the sovereign entity in Gaza. Such a truce arrangement would obligate them to ensure quiet in the Gaza periphery communities and the cities of southern Israel and make it unappealing for them to resort to violence. No less important, it would lay the foundations for direct dialogue with Hamas at the decisive moment when Abu Mazen (Head of the PA) vacates the arena. We cannot prevent it from growing stronger on the Palestinian street.
- Hamas today is not the same Hamas that we knew one or two decades ago. It is a national movement with institutions, governance, foreign relations, and strategic aspirations. It knows how to respond to regional changes, and over the years, it has undergone a process of maturation. Whether we like it or not, the Gaza Strip is, for all practical purposes, a state. Small and besieged, unrecognized internationally, with a fighting army, but it is a state-like entity. Whoever considers it solely a military force and believes that the only way to talk to it is through artillery barrels is sticking their head in the sand.



- **Hamas has been on a journey to take over the captain's chair for years. Since that is its supreme goal, everything else is a means to achieve it. That is why it did not join Islamic Jihad when it was fighting Israel. It was publicly criticized for sitting on the sidelines, but this primarily allowed Hamas to concentrate and also project responsibility to everyone. From its standpoint, the best way to take over the PA is through elections. It hopes that this moment will come after Abu Mazen leaves his position. The PA leader is now 87 and will definitely vacate his seat in the next few years. For that reason, Hamas has been working vigorously to win over hearts and minds, expand its base of support on the Palestinian street, and create admiration for itself on D-Day. In the past, it won the esteem of the masses through terror attacks. In the last bout of warfare in Gaza, it did the opposite. It stood motionlessly to avoid making the situation deteriorate.**
- **Two years ago, during Operation Guardian of the Walls in 2021, it forced ten days of warfare on Israel in order to prove it would make sacrifices for the sake of Jerusalem. Five and six years ago, when it burned the border fence, it worked to obtain relief for the population. An agreement for dollars, work permits, and funding for diesel fuel for the power plant. Even if elections for the leadership of the PA are not held, the base of popular support that Hamas built is supposed to help it with its strategic aspirations. Two actors, in particular, have helped it strengthen its status: the PA, which has grown weaker over the years and, in effect, gradually and surely ceded the arena to Hamas and Israel.**
- **This steadily weakened the PA, and it simultaneously crowned Hamas as the real sovereign in the Gaza Strip through understandings and arrangements. In the Middle East in 2023, the name of the game is growth and development. Five years ago, Saudi women were forbidden to drive cars. This week Saudi Arabia sent a female astronaut into space. The United Arab Emirates has already sent two. The Arab League did not welcome Assad back into the ranks out of love but in order to distance him from the pro-Iranian camp. The world around us is moving forward. Hamas sees all this and realizes how great its responsibility is. The PA is weak and limping. Islamic Jihad is squabbling like a child in the sandbox. From whence will the Palestinian people's future leadership come? Who will get them out of the mud?**
- **Loyal to the doctrine of neglect, Israel took a pass on its duty to foster a moderate Palestinian leadership in the territories to prepare for the day after. We could do all that on relatively convenient terms because the PA was a strong partner that wanted to do business with us and hunted down terrorists. Israel was unable to stabilize the PA, not even economically. This weakness has enfeebled it and undermined its political status even further. Abu Mazen's successors will have a very hard time establishing their power after him, and they might not succeed at all.**
- **Faced with Hamas's growing strength on the Palestinian street, Israel has not rolled out an organized diplomatic outlook: not about Hamas, and not about living together with the Palestinians in the future either. Israel sees Hamas as it was 20 or 30 years ago: a military organization and nothing more. A permanent status solution in the Gaza Strip is a complex diplomatic initiative, but it is possible.**

- It will require Israel to have a profound understanding of the situation, sensitivity toward all sides, and perseverance. It requires Israeli policymakers to have sober analytical abilities and displays of leadership above all. Like any dance with foes, it has risks, but Israel does not have many options.
- Hamas is currently the strongest and best-organized figure on the Palestinian street, and it enjoys the public's support. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu once said that whoever runs from terrorism will be pursued by terrorism. As with terrorism, so too with statecraft. Whoever flees a diplomatic complication will be pursued by it. To date, Israel has avoided any attempt to reach a permanent status arrangement with the Gaza Strip like the plague due to the principle that it does not talk with murderers.
- Hamas is indeed a bitter enemy, and boycotting it is morally valid to a great degree. However, Israel has already talked with enemies and signed agreements with them: Egypt, whose army murdered Israeli POWs, and Yasser Arafat, whose bloodthirstiness needs no proof. If Israel talks with the leadership of Hamas in order to achieve an arrangement, it will not do so in order to give it a prize but to make it more moderate and reduce the danger that it poses.