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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

June 2, 2023

Times of Israel

Coalition Claims Imminent Understandings in Judicial Talks

As pressure mounts for the parties to judicial reform talks at the President's Residence to report progress after two months of stalemate, two members of the coalition's negotiating team have said that a memorandum codifying principles under which the talks will continue can be expected in the next few days, although opposition sources have denied supporting such a declaration. But a source in the opposition with knowledge of the talks said that "there are no agreements, there is no document, and when we asked to see a document, we were told there isn't one yet." Channel 13 published a set of general principles, many of them mirroring broad consensus positions such as guaranteeing free elections, that were said to be part of the "document of principles." All parties to the stalled talks agree that any discussion on what both sides deem the most critical issue at stake — whether to increase political control over selecting judges — is off the table for the moment. [Read More "Senior US Official: Likud Bill Targeting NGOs That Receive Foreign Funding Is 'Dead'" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Axios

Bar in DC for Talks on West Bank and Gaza Tensions

Ronen Bar, the director of the Israeli domestic security agency Shin Bet, is visiting Washington for talks with senior Biden administration officials about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other issues. As one of the most influential national security officials and the most senior Israeli intelligence authority on the situation in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, Bar has a lot of influence on the Israeli government's policies. The Biden administration and the Israeli security establishment have increasingly expressed concerns about the stability of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the possibility of a third Intifada. The visit comes several weeks after a round of violence in Gaza between Israel and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) that ended with a cease-fire. [Read More "Blinken Cancels Planned Israel Visit" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Infant Critically Wounded by IDF After Clashes with Militants

A Palestinian man and his 2-year-old infant son were wounded by Israeli military gunfire in the West Bank. The infant is in critical condition, while his father sustained serious wounds. According to the Israeli military, the two were injured after armed militants opened fire at the settlement of Neveh Tzuf, north of Ramallah, and soldiers who were deployed at a nearby military position returned fire. The two casualties were brought to the entrance to the settlement for emergency medical treatment. The infant was evacuated in a military helicopter to Tel Hashomer Hospital. Elsewhere in the West Bank, an Israeli soldier was lightly wounded by shrapnel after shots were fired at the Dayr Sharaf checkpoint in the northern West Bank.

Amid Peace with Iran, Egypt Invites Hamas, Jihad Leaders

Leaders of Hamas and the PIJ headed to Cairo for talks with Egyptian intelligence officials on ways to preserve the current ceasefire agreement with Israel, Palestinian sources said. The talks will also focus on ways of ending the dispute between Hamas and the ruling Fatah faction headed by PA President Mahmoud Abbas, the sources said. Previous attempts by Egypt and other Arab countries to end the rivalry between the two parties have hit a snag. Both Egypt and the PA are eager to play a role in the reconstruction of the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. However, Hamas has imposed restrictions on the authority, banning its officials from carrying out activities in the Strip. The visit comes amid reports about a possible rapprochement between Egypt and Iran, which has long been backing Hamas and PIJ.

Gallant Says Israel May Have to Act Amid 'Threats From Iran'

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said that following the "intensifying threats by Iran" Israel may be required to act to defend the country and the future of the Jewish people. "In light of the International Atomic Energy Agency's report stating that Iran possesses a sufficient amount of enriched uranium for two nuclear bombs, the threats facing the State of Israel are growing and intensifying and we may be required to fulfill our duty in order to protect the integrity of Israel," Gallant said at a ceremony for the promotion of two major generals in the IDF. The report by the IAEA stated that, in recent months, Iran has continued to violate the terms of the nuclear agreement and has significantly increased its stockpile of enriched uranium. [Read More "After IAEA Closes Uranium Probes, Israel Says It Bowed to Iranian Pressure" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Israel Announces New Natural Gas Field off Its Coast

Israel's Ministry of Energy and Infrastructure and Greek-British hydrocarbon exploration and production company Energean announced the discovery of a new natural gas field off the coast of Israel. The field has been given the name "Katlan," which means "orca" in Hebrew. Estimated at 68 billion cubic meters, the new field was technically discovered in May 2022 as part of search and discovery work by Energean under permit No. 12, essentially focusing on the discovery of the Karish and Tanin reserves. Katlan is considered rather small compared with other fields off the Israeli coast. Still, with Israel's annual consumption estimated at less than 13 billion cubic meters, the new discovery is important. The Katlan undersea gas field falls within Israel's economic waters. By contrast, the Aphrodite field is mostly in Cypriot territorial waters, with only a small part in Israeli waters. The Kana-Sidon undersea reservoir is mostly in Lebanese waters and only a small part in Israeli waters. Since the discovery of the first natural gas reserves off the coast of Israel in 2004, the state had generated about \$5.35 billion in revenues, which have been placed into the Israeli Wealth Fund. In 2022, Israel received \$45.5 million in royalties from the companies exploiting its offshore gas fields.

US Imposes Sanctions on Companies Tied to Sudan Forces

The United States imposed sanctions on companies it accused of fueling the conflict in Sudan, stepping up pressure on the army and a rival paramilitary force to stop fighting raging in Khartoum and other regions. The US Treasury Department said it targeted two companies linked to the army, including the country's largest defense enterprise, and two companies tied to the rival paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, including one involved in gold mining. The conflict, which broke out on April 15, has killed hundreds, forced more than 1.6 million to flee, and turned the three cities that make up the capital around the confluence of the Nile - Khartoum, Omdurman, and Bahri - into a war zone. Residents said heavy artillery fire could be heard in northern Omdurman and intermittent firing in southern Bahri, despite a deal for a ceasefire that is meant to run till Saturday evening. The US, alongside Saudi Arabia, has been leading efforts to try to secure an effective ceasefire at talks in Jeddah, though both sides have breached a string of truces. Saudi Arabia and the US said they were suspending the talks after Sudan's army announced it was halting its participation. [Dig Deeper "White House Imposing Sanctions as Sudan's Warring Sides Fail to Abide by Cease-Fire Deal" \(Associated Press\)](#)

Jordan Crown Prince Weds Saudi Rajwa Al-Saif

The Jordan royal wedding took place in Amman, in which the eldest son of Jordan's King Abdullah II, Crown Prince Al Hussein bin Abdullah, married his Saudi fiancée Rajwa Al-Saif. After a month of preparations, a long list of monarchs from all over the world attended the ceremony, including the Prince and Princess of Wales, King Juan Carlos I and Queen Sofia of Spain, Crown Princess Elisabeth and King Philippe of Belgium, the Netherlands' King Willem-Alexander and Queen Maxima. Among 140 guests was also US First Lady Jill Biden and her daughter. The ceremony was held in the mid-century Zahran Palace in the capital Amman - the site of other key royal weddings, including that of King Abdullah II to Queen Rania as well as that of his father, the late King Hussein bin Talal. Prince Hussein became heir to the throne in 2009 after his father removed the title from his half-brother Hamzah in 2004. [Dig Deeper "Royal Wedding Showpiece Highlights Jordan's Role as West's Stable Ally" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

A Three-Way Deal

By Shirit Avitan Cohen

- Israel appears to be unable to prevent the United States from moving forward with coming to a new nuclear agreement with Iran. Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer and National Security Council Director Tzahi Hanegbi left yesterday for the US to hold meetings on that issue—though it isn't clear whether they will secure any achievements for Israel and, if so, how significant those achievements may be. Dermer and Hanegbi's meetings in the United States are expected to focus on two critical issues: the Biden administration's renewed efforts to come to an agreement with Iran and Israel's chances of normalizing relations with Saudi Arabia.
- The United States has created a linkage between those two issues behind the scenes. How so? The United States wants to pacify the Middle East in the face of Iran's endless endeavor to enrich uranium to 90%, and it wants to use diplomatic means to keep Iran from doing that. In anticipation of Israeli opposition to an agreement of that kind, and given the fact that the option of attack has never been removed from the table, the option of advancing a normalization agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia has resurfaced, which might quiet the Israeli front. Retired Israeli political officials said that they believed that incumbent officials in Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's office are inclined to accept the deal that is currently being sewn up. Some of them describe that as a "surrender agreement."
- The Biden administration has never given up on coming to a diplomatic solution with Iran. The United States' goal is to delay Iran from enriching uranium to 90% at a price that it considers to be miniscule: a lax interim agreement that would partially lift sanctions, facilitating an influx of billions of dollars into the lagging Iranian economy. Retired Israeli political officials told Israel Hayom that "the fact that no public measures have been taken by Israel against the agreement that is being cobbled together attests to agreements that have been reached under the table. Otherwise, Netanyahu would have acted the way he did in 2015." Israeli officials denied reports that Israel has desisted from acting to prevent an agreement from being reached [between the United States and Iran].
- One official in the Prime Minister's Bureau told Israel Hayom, "The State of Israel hasn't changed its position." The official went on to say, "Israel is acting by every means possible, through every channel and at every level, against the attempt to allow Iran to achieve nuclear capability and nuclear weapons." One of the ways that have been chosen appears to be the visits by Dermer and Hanegbi to the US. That said, Israeli officials refused to comment on their meetings. Danny Citrinowicz, a research fellow in the Iran Program at the Institute for National Security Studies, confirmed that the Americans want an agreement. "From a political standpoint, Biden can't return to the original agreement because he simply can't get it approved by Congress," said Citrinowicz. "But the American administration is still deeply troubled by the fact that Iran is but a step away from enriching to 90%, and that's why they need to 'tighten the screws,' so that the Iranian regime doesn't do that.

- On the other side of the divide, the Iranians want to return to the [nuclear] agreement because they need the sanctions on oil to be eased. That's the most important thing for them." Citrinowicz said that in the situation that has evolved, "both sides have an option of reaching an agreement about a limited nuclear agreement that involves an agreement to stop enrichment above 20% in exchange for certain eased sanctions and an influx of funds as a result into the Iranian economy." The former National Security Council director, Meir Ben-Shabbat, said an agreement of that kind would qualify as a surrender agreement. Ben-Shabbat said, "An agreement that leaves Iran close to being a nuclear threshold state, frees up its money, and allows it to build up [military capabilities]—is terrible."
- Ben-Shabbat went on to say that the message the Americans would be sending with an agreement of that kind would negatively impact the entire region and allow Iran to retain its new status in the region and around the world. "An agreement of this sort will continue to broadcast American and Western weakness vis-à-vis Iran and will weaken them in the fight for the new world order, especially when that is being done while Iran has continued to stir the pot in other arenas and is involved in supplying UAVs to Russia for the war in Ukraine," said Ben-Shabbat. "An agreement of this kind will allow Iran to enjoy the best of all worlds: to continue with its nuclear efforts deceitfully and covertly, and to enjoy resources and its new position in the global arena."
- Not everyone agrees with the description of that agreement as a "surrender agreement," Citrinowicz said that there isn't really any other option on the Iranian issue unless the route chosen is to take offensive action. "This truly would be a weak agreement and not exceptional diplomatic handiwork," he said. "I don't see Israel either influencing this event or succeeding in scuttling an agreement, certainly not when the Americans present it as a very limited agreement. In return, the administration apparently is going to give Israel a lollypop [compensation] in the form of progress with the Saudis." Notably, an agreement among Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United States have some very difficult aspects from an Israeli perspective as well.
- Put simply, Dermer and Hanegbi are expected to discuss Saudi demands for a civilian nuclear program and for advanced weapons systems that would undercut Israel's qualitative edge in the region. Earlier this week Hanegbi spoke publicly about Israel's concerns about the weapons systems being demanded by the Saudis, but a civilian nuclear program could be problematic in the future in the event of regime change in Saudi Arabia. Israel had that very same experience with Saudi Arabia's next-door neighbor: Iran.

The Gaza State

By Eitan Ben Eliyahu

- From the dawn of terrorism to today, the Israelis have shown impressive determination and power to withstand [difficult times]. From the time independence was declared to today, the IDF has grown stronger, Israel's economic situation has grown stronger, and its diplomatic standing has improved. But no solution to the Israel-Palestinian clash has been found. This ongoing situation has led to a feeling of “there is no solution” to the diplomatic impasse.
- In the absence of an agreed solution, the only thing left to do—with a great deal of patience—is to encourage the creation of a reality that leads to a solution. Ironically, the quagmire Israel has become embroiled in Gaza might contain a potential path: A “Gaza state” reality. The lesson of the operations forced on us again and again by Gaza show that: A) the behavior of the Israeli population, together with the Iron Dome and absolute air superiority, ensure [Israel will continue to enjoy] an advantage in every round, and B) Hamas becomes more careful with each passing round, even when forced to deal with rogue organizations that do not bow to Hamas' will as the accepted power in the Gaza Strip. A clear proof of this was during Operation Shield and Arrow when Hamas refrained from participating in the fighting.
- Third, pressure from Gaza residents to live normal lives is growing, and every time they are forced to suffer the power of the IDF, they blame Hamas. Fourth, the more time that passes Gaza residents are not alone in seeing themselves as living in a country. So does the Hamas leadership and all political actors in the region. And fifth, no one is suggesting that Israel return to ruling over Gaza. History and the lessons show that it would only be a small step to get from the current state of affairs and Gaza as a state.
- Gaza is just 362 square kilometers (139 square miles) in area, with a population of two million residents. The birth rate is particularly high. Yes, overcrowding like this is tough, and building a thriving country under these conditions is not realistic. Having said that, there are some statistics that increase the possibility of creating a state in Gaza. Gaza borders on the sea. Its area can be expanded by drying the area near the coast; it will be possible to build an airport on the dry land that is located in the sea that doesn't disrupt flight paths in and out of Israel. A commercial port that would be built on the Gaza coast would service the movement of goods to Sinai and overseas. However, geographic conditions will not be sufficient to speed up the political process in the Gaza Strip. There has got to be political will. From this perspective, Egypt is the main player. The clashes between Israel and Hamas expose Egypt to danger. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that under pressure and hopes for quiet, Egypt could even want to increase the size of the Strip at the expense of some territory from Sinai—an expansion that could reach as far as El-Arish. We can go even further with our dream of a State of Gaza: There is a phenomenal strip of coastline between El-Arish and Port Said—Lake Bardawil—that could serve as an ideal foundation for the creation of a global project to create a global center for finance, free trade, and entertainment, like Dubai and Macau.

- **Such a center, the advantage of which is its location on the Mediterranean coast adjacent to and closer to the Western world, would create hundreds of thousands of jobs, a source of revenue for Egyptians and for Gazans, and a source of revenue for the Egyptian government. A huge project of this scale will only be built with the help of governments that spurred into having a desire and vision for a better economic and political future in the Middle East and with the financial help of world leaders motivated by financial and perhaps philanthropic considerations. This is a distant vision, and it is questionable whether it will ever be realized. But the benefit of it is in the fact that it would create a reality in which there is no need for agreements and includes within it a ray of light that might spark new thinking in the region.**