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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Thursday, August 3

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News Excerpts

August 3, 2017

Ynet News

Shaked: PM Shouldn't Resign Based on Charges Alone

Minister of Justice Ayelet Shaked asserted Wednesday that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should not have to resign if indicted, only if convicted. "The law states the prime minister doesn't have to resign. We'll wait and see. There's a lot of misinformation in the media, for example in reports the prime minister or even some of the ministers are embroiled in the submarine affair, which the attorney general declared to be false. At the end of the day, an indictment is served on evidence," she told Ynet in an interview.

See also, ["AG Cites 'Progress' in Bid to Enlist Netanyahu's Ex-Aide as State's Witness" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ma'ariv

Most Israelis Feel Bibi Knew of Confidants' Sub. Involvement

Fifty-five percent of the Israeli public believes that Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu knew about his confidants' involvement in the submarines affair, according to the new Peace Index poll conducted by Tel Aviv University and the Israel Democracy Institute. The public was divided in its answer to the following question: "Was the prime minister's decision to purchase submarines influenced by personal considerations?" Forty percent say he was influenced by personal considerations, whereas 38% said he was not. A minority of Israelis (36% versus 52%) believes the prime minister did not attempt to calm the situation down after the Temple Mount flare-up in order to distract the public's attention away from the various corruption cases.

Jerusalem Post

Netanyahu: We're Connecting Beitar Illit Settlement to J'lem

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu promised to help link the Beitar Illit settlement to Jerusalem by building a new road that would cut commuting time between the two cities by 15 minutes. "We're connecting Beitar Illit to Jerusalem," said Netanyahu as he stood in the second largest West Bank settlement. He was there to open a new neighborhood in the Haredi city of over 50,000 people, which was first created in the 1990s. Thursday morning's event marked Netanyahu's first visit to the city since taking office in 2009 and the first time that he has attended a corner stone laying ceremony for a large new neighborhood in Judea and Samaria.

Times of Israel

IDF Blockades Hometown of Pal. Who Stabbed Grocery Worker

Security forces on Wednesday placed a cordon around the West Bank town of Yatta, hours after a Palestinian resident stabbed a supermarket worker in a terror attack in a central Israeli town. All traffic coming in and out of the village was being checked, the IDF said in a statement. Earlier Israeli troops raided the Yatta home of Ismail Ibrahim Ismail Abu Aram, 19, who was arrested after stabbing and critically wounding an Israeli man, at a supermarket in the city of Yavneh.

See also, ["Palestinian Stabs and Critically Wounds Israeli at Supermarket in Central Israel" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Rivlin Laments Low Arab Turnout at Co-op Security Event

Efforts to vump up cooperative activities between authorities of the Arab sector and the Israel Police were dealt a humiliating blow Wednesday after just 20 Arab leaders out of a total 46 Arab mayors and local authority heads bothered to show up to a meeting with President Reuven Rivlin and Police Commissioner Roni Alsheikh. The meeting, which was convened at the President's Residence, was opened with remarks delivered by President Rivlin, who expressed his regret and disappointment at the weak turnout of the Arab leaders.

See also, ["Three Israeli-Arabs Sent to Six Months in Jail Without Trial" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Ha'aretz

AIPAC Throws Support Behind Taylor Force Act

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee expressed its strong support on Wednesday for the Taylor Force Act, legislation which would freeze U.S. financial support to the Palestinian Authority as long as the PA offers salaries to convicted terrorists and their families. AIPAC wrote that they hoped that the legislation would "send a clear message to the Palestinian Authority: Stop these payments to terrorists and their families or your assistance will be cut." The bill was first proposed in February, but over the last few weeks it has been amended to make a distinction between money that directly benefits the PA and money that supports hospitals and humanitarian projects in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. The new version of the bill was presented on Tuesday.

See also, ["US Senate Panel to Vote on Taylor Force Act" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Defense News

Israel Begins Concept Work on Arrow-4 Defender

Israel's Defense Ministry and industry developers have begun early work on what could evolve into the Arrow-4, a new missile-intercepting system to defend against much more sophisticated, future threats from Iran. In interviews, defense and industry sources assess the specter of massive salvo strikes, sub-munition warheads and multiple reentry vehicles, or MRV, as the next major technological challenges that Israel's integrated, multi-tiered national defense network may have to contend with a decade down the road. To this end, Israel's MAFAT Defense Research and Development Authority is working with Israel Aerospace Industries and other firms to evaluate technologies needed to improve the ability to track, target and ultimately destroy such threats.

Times of Israel

Rouhani Vows to End Iran's Isolation as He Starts Second Term

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani vowed to continue his efforts to end the country's isolation as he was sworn in for a second term on Thursday by supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamanei. "We will never accept isolation," Rouhani told a packed audience of Iranian political and military officials in Tehran. "The nuclear deal is a sign of Iran's goodwill on the international stage," he said, referring to the 2015 agreement with world powers to curb its atomic program in exchange for an easing of sanctions.

See also, ["Iran Accuses US of Breaching Nuclear Deal" \(Reuters\)](#)

Why Israelis Have Turned Against IDF, Shin Bet

By Ben Caspit

- In almost all the years of Israel's existence, the heads of its military and other defense organizations were practically sacrosanct. Israel may be the only country in the world that is forced to fight for its very existence on a regular basis. Its people live under a long-standing state of siege, surrounded by enemies who would like to see them thrown into the sea. That is why Israelis are so aware that without a powerful Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the military's superiority in the air and top-notch intelligence agencies, the country wouldn't last a single day in this part of the world.
- While those days have long gone, even in the modern era, the IDF's generals and the heads and senior officials of the Shin Bet, the Mossad and other such organizations were the most popular people in Israel by an enormous margin.
- The same is true about the various defense ministers. The position of defense minister was always considered the ultimate springboard to leadership, and anyone who held the office was at the top of every ranking of politicians by popularity. Israel's defense minister was usually someone with a heroic military past. He did not deal with mundane affairs. He would not dirty himself with politics. He did not deal with bureaucracy. Instead, the defense minister visited the various military bases and handed out ranks, usually in full battledress, sunglasses and a modicum of stardust. Even now, years after his death, and even after his pristine image was shattered by the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, with his black eyepatch, is still considered a mythological figure. He remains one of the most admired people from the young state's early days.
- All of that changed right before our eyes over the past two years. Moshe Ya'alon is a former defense minister who also served as chief of staff. Yet he was obliterated in public opinion polls once he condemned the actions of the Hebron shooter Elor Azaria. The public, particularly the Israeli right, would not forgive his calls to punish the wayward soldier who shot a dying terrorist.
- Israeli public opinion has veered to the right over the last few years. The public has become more right wing, the left has been diminished and concern about such concepts as the peace process or the suffering of the Palestinians has been reduced accordingly. This has had a profound impact on politicians, particularly on the right. Prompted by their voters, they are constantly veering ever more to the right.
- So, for instance, just last week on July 23, the popular Minister of Culture Miri Regev called the Shin Bet "delusional." Once it was learned that the Shin Bet recommended to the Cabinet that it remove the metal detectors at the entrances to the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, the chairman of the coalition, Knesset member David Bitan, declared in a radio interview that the Shin Bet is cowardly and that all its agents want is to get home in one piece. He was still speaking when attorney Yoram Sheftel, a darling of the far right, attacked Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot. Sheftel called him "pathetic" and said that he "does not, in any way, shape or form, have the appearance of a soldier."

- He is similar, in his appearance, to a file clerk in the Kirya [IDF headquarters]." Sheftel is not a political figure. He has a popular radio show and is considered a guru of the far right. He also spearheaded the appeal of the Hebron shooter Azaria after a court convicted him of manslaughter. Sheftel was criticized for his comments about the chief of staff and he eventually apologized for them, but even then, the uproar that his comments evoked was limited in scope. Large swathes of the public, particularly on the right, have been convinced recently that the chief of staff and other heads of the armed services are essentially a group of leftists constantly trying to influence the right-wing government to "get back on track."
- This constitutes a real revolution to the Israeli social fabric. It can all be traced back to a law passed in 2007, commonly known as the Dan Halutz Law. The person behind this law was none other than Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The law established a three-year cooling off period (which is extended to four years when considering the adaptation year granted to retiring senior officers) from when officers complete their service in the military or other branch of the security apparatus and when they can run for elected office.
- Netanyahu wanted to block generals and other popular military commanders from entering politics in order to ensure that they do not pose a threat to his status as "permanent" prime minister. He succeeded. Israel's defense establishment, which was the country's largest leadership incubator and training center during Israel's first 60 years, has since been defused. No one remembers the daring exploits of some general or other four years after he left the IDF. The heroic aura that once surrounded him has long since faded away, and any threat to the country's leadership has been reduced considerably, as his entry into politics generates little public attention.
- Growing criticism of the supposedly hefty wages, benefit packages and pensions of career officers in Israel has played a part in this too, especially when combined with the rightward shift of the Israeli electorate. Meanwhile, the IDF and other security services continue to represent a clear and professional attitude, which sees the geopolitical situation in the Middle East from a more sober perspective. The result is a growing disconnect between the people of Israel and its defenders. In this new reality, Israelis still love their troops dearly. The problem is that they are wary of their troops' commanders. The defense minister is little more than a political figure subject to intense criticism. He no longer receives the benefit of the doubt. The chief of staff is judged by his actions. The Shin Bet is expected to toe the government's line instead of preserving professional judgment. And the list goes on and on.
- There are those who will say that these are all signs of a normal country — one that is less militaristic and more critical of itself. In the case of Israel, however, it is not at all certain that this is the right diagnosis. In the past, Israel's political leadership was forced to rein in its generals, who always wanted to take action and perhaps even put the state at risk by initiating unnecessary military adventurism. The situation has changed since then. Now it is the generals who have to rein in the political leadership by explaining the risks, geopolitical interests and other truly important issues.
- Israel has changed. Its sacred cows are being slaughtered one by one, and the herd feels totally free to go its own way. In the Middle East, that's a dangerous way to go.

Ben Caspit is a columnist for Al-Monitor's and senior columnist for other Israeli newspapers.

Summary:

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Relations Between Israel, Jordan Have Become Very Dangerous

By Noga Tarnopolsky

- Relations between Israel and Jordan, neighboring states that signed a peace treaty in 1994, have hit rock bottom after twin decisions by the Israeli government that have been widely seen as an affront to Jordan's King Abdullah II.
- The first was Israel's order, since rescinded, to install metal detectors at the Noble Sanctuary, the Muslim name for the disputed plateau in Jerusalem's Old City that holds the Al Aqsa Mosque and gold Dome of the Rock. Although Israel backed down, the decision was seen as a slap to Jordan, which is the legal custodian of the site. The other involved Israel's response to a deadly incident in the Jordanian capital, Amman, in which an Israeli Embassy guard killed two Jordanians, a 17-year-old delivery boy and an orthopedic surgeon.
- The result has been a diplomatic and social-media chill between the two countries and their leaders that has little precedence in the years since the peace treaty was signed. "The whole thing is very dangerous," said Salameh Nematt, a Jordanian writer and political analyst, in an interview from the United States, where he was traveling.
- Referring to the Amman shooting and its aftermath, he said: "The incident itself, which is provocative, isn't dangerous for the king, but it comes as so many factors are exerting enormous pressure on Jordan: the economy, the refugee crisis, a lack of progress on internal problems. Something like this can be the straw that breaks the camel's back."
- Late Tuesday, addressing an emergency session of the executive committee of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Jordan's foreign minister, Ayman Safadi, admonished Israel that "the crisis is over, but many more and far more dangerous crises will erupt as a result of continued Israeli violations." The Israeli government has not commented officially on the Jordanian complaints.
- Israel and Jordan had been discreetly cooperating to resolve the upheaval at the holy site, known as the Temple Mount to Jews, when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warmly welcomed home the embassy guard who was involved in the deadly altercation in Amman.
- On July 25, Netanyahu tweeted — in both Arabic and English — an image of himself embracing the guard, Ziv Moyal, and praising him for having "acted well and calmly." The incident involved a dispute over a delayed delivery of furniture at the Israeli Embassy compound. Israeli and Jordanian officials said that the Jordanian teenager, Mohammed Jawawdeh, attacked Moyal with a screwdriver, and Moyal responded with shots that killed Jawawdeh and the surgeon and left another man critically injured.
- After keeping silent for 48 hours, a furious King Abdullah, normally one of the Middle East's least demonstrative leaders, fired off an extraordinary sequence of tweets, in English.
- It wasn't until 7 p.m. on Friday, when Netanyahu's religious, right-wing base had presumably switched off all electronic devices in honor of the Sabbath, that the Israeli Foreign Ministry acknowledged, only in Hebrew and only via WhatsApp, that Israel had launched a full investigation into Moyal's actions.

- Israeli analysts attributed the chaos to political pandering on Netanyahu's part as he confronts an array of criminal investigations and challenges from within his own Cabinet. Adding to the stress, on Wednesday, his wife, Sara Netanyahu, was questioned by police as a criminal suspect in an investigation into the misappropriation of public funds. Barak Ravid, diplomatic correspondent for the left-leaning newspaper Haaretz, wrote that "Netanyahu's spin machine is working overtime, and could destroy Israel's ties with Jordan.... It's astounding to see how much damage was caused just for short-term political spin for Israeli public opinion."
- In the eyes of many Israelis, there was something uncomfortably familiar in what was perceived as Netanyahu's disrespect toward Abdullah. "It's Obama all over again," fumed a former senior Israeli diplomat, who asked not to be identified because of the sensitivity of the situation. The diplomat was referring to Netanyahu's chilly relations with former President Obama, including a 2015 address to a joint session of Congress that he delivered without coordination with the White House. In it, he argued against the nuclear deal with Iran, Obama's signature foreign policy objective. "This is the result of a longtime, ongoing, obstinate policy that doesn't even bother for the sake of appearances to be considerate to any partner, friend or foe. It is simply a continuous state of non-communication," the former diplomat said.
- Oded Eran, a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies and a former Israeli ambassador to Jordan, said that ad hoc solutions will not repair the damage. In an interview, he called on Israel to "seize the political and operational initiative before international and regional entities do, and propose an international summit on measures that can prevent radical entities from violating freedom of worship and freedom of access to the Temple Mount, a site holy to both Judaism and Islam."
- Before any summit could be planned, Israel and Jordan narrowly avoided yet another collision. As relations between the two countries deteriorated, two flamboyant parliamentarians — one from Israel, one from Jordan — fought via their Twitter feeds. Eventually, Jordanian Yehiya Saoud challenged the Israeli, Oren Hazan, a member of Netanyahu's Likud Party, to a duel in the Judean desert at 10 a.m. Wednesday. Hazan, a former pimp who gained an extra measure of fame when he crashed Donald Trump's arrival ceremony in Tel Aviv last May to snag a selfie with the president, accepted.
- Gleeful online anticipation followed Hazan's progress toward the Allenby Bridge border post until someone in Netanyahu's office got wind of the scheme and sharply ordered Hazan back home. Saoud arrived unimpeded, crossed the border into Israel, and promptly began questioning journalists who had gathered to witness the fight. "If you say you're a journalist from historic Palestine, lets talk. If you say from Israel, no," he said. Like every other step in the unhappy pas de deux, this too was tweeted live.

Noga Tarnopolsky has two decades of experience covering international politics. Her work has appeared in the New York Times, the New Yorker, the Washington Post and El País, among others.

Summary:

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