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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, August 28*

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# News Excerpts

August 28, 2019

## Jerusalem Post

### **Israeli Defense Officials Warn Against Annexing West Bank**

Twenty-five former Israeli senior security and defense officials thanked Congress for passing legislation that endorsed a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict while rejecting efforts to boycott the Jewish state. The letter sent Tuesday also weighed in against Israel unilaterally annexing all or part of the West Bank, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said he is considering if re-elected. “Any unilateral annexation of territory or extension of sovereignty to the West Bank will put Israel’s security and safety along with the well-being of its citizens at risk,” the letter said. It was signed by former heads of the Mossad and Israel Security Agency, or Shin Bet, and three former advisers to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

See also, [“Former Israeli Security Officials Laud Congress’ Support for Two-state Solution” \(Ha’aretz\)](#)

## Ma’ariv

### **Filber: PM Instructed Me to Ensure Modest Drop in Bezeq Prices**

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu asked the director general of the Communications Ministry to act on behalf of his associate—the tycoon Shaul Elovitch, who owned Bezeq and *Walla*—according to statements that Shlomo Filber, who is a state’s witness in Case 4,000, made to the police. Excerpts of those statements to the police were reported last night by Channel 12. Case 4,000 is the most serious of the three cases in which Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit intends to indict Netanyahu. Filber told the detectives how the prime minister had changed the Communications Ministry’s position on two issues that were important to Netanyahu’s friend, Shaul Elovitch.

## Channel 12 News

### **Filber’s Account Draws Furious Reactions: “Horrific Corruption”**

The excerpts from statements that were made to the police by the state’s witness in Case 4,000, Shlomo Filber, as reported last night by Hahadashot’s Guy Peleg, drew fiery reactions about Prime Minister Netanyahu. “Yet another evening of news about horrific corruption at the citizens’ expense and, apparently, at the expense of the country’s security,” wrote Blue and White Chairman Benny Gantz on Twitter in response to Peleg’s report and the new developments that in Case 3,000, otherwise known as the submarines affair, by the competing channel [Channel Thirteen News]. “The suspect from Balfour’s obsession with the media cost the taxpayers 1.8 billion shekels,” charged Ehud Barak of the Democratic Union. “Netanyahu took from every household in Israel 800 shekels and gave it to Elovitch. That is money that [could have been] earmarked for hospital beds, a better education system, for expanding the medication basket—instead that money went to replacing pictures of the Netanyahu family on the *Walla* website.”

See also, [“Netanyahu said to have okayed sub sale to Egypt to get discount from Germany” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## **Sharp Rise in People Seeking Help for PTSD in Southern Israel**

At least 327 people received treatment from mental health services across communities bordering the Gaza Strip this summer due to post-traumatic stress disorder caused by the surge in border violence. According to data received by Ynet's sister publication Yedioth Ahronoth, these numbers stem from another terror-ridden summer that saw hundreds of rockets being fired toward the area from the Hamas-controlled enclave, incendiary balloons scorching the local fields, violent March of Return demonstrations along the security fence, as well as several infiltration attempts. This summer there have been at least 12 rounds of cross border fighting between Israel and the Palestinian factions in the Strip. The most recent escalation saw at least three rockets fired at the southern city of Sderot where some 4,000 people, who were attending a music festival, had been forced to look for shelter in panic as rocket alert sirens wailed.

Israel Hayom

## **Honduran President to Inaugurate 'Diplomatic Office' in Jerusalem**

Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández will travel to Jerusalem to inaugurate a "diplomatic office" in the city on Sept. 1, the Honduran government said in a statement on Tuesday. The office represents an extension of Honduras's embassy in the country, the Honduran government said. Ever since US President Donald Trump's historic announcement recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, only Guatemala has followed in the United States' footsteps to fully relocate its embassy to Jerusalem.

Wall Street Journal

## **Bolton: Iran Sanctions Removal Only After New Iran Deal**

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani on Tuesday rejected the possibility of meeting with President Trump as long as the U.S. sanctioned his country. In response, U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton told *Radio Free Europe* on Tuesday: "The idea that Iran would receive some tangible economic benefit merely for stopping doing things that it shouldn't have been doing in the first place is just a non-starter. If there's a comprehensive deal, then of course, the sanctions will come off at that point."

See also, ["The hype over possible U.S.-Iran talks obscured something much more ominous" \(Editorial, Wash Post\)](#)

Times of Israel

## **Hezbollah No. 2 threatens Israel with retaliation in 'coming days'**

The deputy leader of Iran-backed Lebanese terror group Hezbollah on Tuesday night warned that his movement would deliver a "surprise" response in the coming days to a series of alleged Israeli raids. After Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah on Sunday threatened retaliatory strikes against Israel, his deputy added a warning of his own late on Tuesday. "We want the strike to be a surprise... and so there is no interest in diving into the details. The coming days will reveal this," Naim Qassem said in an interview with Russian channel RT Arabic.

## **A Spotlight on a Mountain of Corruption**

By Ben Caspit

- Shlomo (Momo) Filber isn't just another close confidant. He isn't just another aide, a guileful assistant or the magician's apprentice. Filber is one of the closest, most loyal, most devoted and most admiring people Netanyahu ever had work for him. He is what Avigdor Lieberman was in the early stages, just without the personal ambition. Filber is entirely about Bibi.
- As someone who has been covering Netanyahu for more than two decades, I can say that Filber was always there. Always. Without conditions, demands or complaint. He was there in the campaigns in 1996 and in 1999 (he was responsible for special tasks, secret investigations and collecting material). He was there after Netanyahu was ousted (in 1999). He was there when Netanyahu paid his condolences to Geula Hershkowitz in 2001 and spoke without censorship and without cameras (at least that's what he thought). Filber was there, standing at the side of the room. On the eve of the 2015 elections, when Netanyahu assembled his operations officers in the Yesha Council and told them that he wasn't the only one who was fighting for his home, and that they too would be expelled if he lost the election, Filber produced that meeting.
- That is why Filber's account, as presented yesterday by Hahadashot's Guy Peleg, is more than merely a dramatic document. It shines a clear, bright and focused spotlight on the mountain of corruption. It was with good reason that Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit described Case 4,000 as "the locomotive pulling the train of corruption."
- That locomotive emerged from the fog with the statements that were made by Filber, who in 2015 was the newly-appointed director general of the Communications Ministry. Filber was appointed after the incumbent ministry director general was fired over the telephone and his policy, which was formulated to serve the consumer public, was buried unceremoniously. Netanyahu was the undertaker. Filber was the *Hevra Kadisha* [burial society] worker who dug the grave.
- It's all out in the open now. Netanyahu took two billion shekels out of our pockets, at our expense, and gave it to Shaul Elovitch in exchange for Elovitch placing *Walla's* website and studio at the Netanyahu family's service. "Two and a half news items on *Walla*," Netanyahu said, ridiculing the allegations. If he were to look at all the material that the police and the State Attorney's Office have collected in this affair, he would see how ridiculous it really was. *Walla* was enlisted in its entirety back then to serve the royal family.
- On Election Day [in 2015], when Netanyahu disseminated the lie that the Arabs were heading in droves to the polling stations and were being driven there by left wing organizations, there was one news site that went so far as to plant that fake news at the top of its homepage for close to 24 hours, throughout the entire duration of the voting. Yes, you guessed right, it was *Walla*.
- Filber's account of what happened to him, what motivated him to betray the public's confidence, the consumers, the civil service, is almost touching. A lot of things can be said about Filber, but he was never a liar.

- In the initial stages of the investigation into Case 4,000, well before Netanyahu's involvement became evident, the detectives were baffled: why didn't Filber pocket a single shekel for himself in return for the service that he granted Elovitch and which was worth billions? Once he signed a state's witness agreement they understood why.
- After he finished giving his account, he said: "I had a blackout and an eclipse. A desire to ignore. Someone else might have become aware and might have begun to think... I needed to cut [separate] between my being Netanyahu's confidant and secret-bearer and between my being a public servant."
- Filber went in the direction of serving Netanyahu. He had been his aide, adviser and confidant for his entire life. Suddenly, he found himself appointed director general of an important ministry. He wanted to bask in the glory and to prove himself. He told himself a story and convinced himself that everything was okay. To his credit, one needs to say that he ultimately realized that nothing was okay.
- He went through something that a good many others also went through and would yet go through: he was hypnotized. The "bubble of lunacy," the environment surrounding the three members of the Netanyahu family (the mother, the father and the raging spirit). Everyone who catches even a glimpse suffers, loses his common sense, his good judgment, his ability to think independently, his spine. Just take a quick look at the political map and you'll understand.
- Succinctly: Netanyahu called Filber two weeks after the disastrous victory (disastrous from Netanyahu's perspective), after having fired the professional and honest director general, Avi Berger (who was appointed by Gilad Erdan) and, after appointing himself communications minister, he instructed Filber to be forthcoming with Elovitch. To take action to avert a sharp drop in prices from ensuing from the reform in landline telephone service, and to make sure the drop in prices was moderate. Netanyahu also instructed Filber to lift all of the restrictions that Berger had imposed in connection to the merger (which Filber described as "disastrous") between Bezeq and Yes, Elovitch's two toys.
- The two of those together were worth two billion shekels to the beleaguered tycoon. Now, I suspect, Elovitch would be more than willing to pay those two billion shekels to regain his innocence and his life. But it's too late for that now.

## **Is Iraq the New Front Line in Israel's Conflict with Iran?**

*Nearly four decades after taking out Saddam Hussein's nuclear reactor, Israel once again faces threats emanating from Iranian-backed militias in Iraq.*

BY AMOS YADLIN, ARI HEISTEIN

- Israel's 1981 airstrike on the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq was historic in that it set the precedent for what became known as the "Begin Doctrine." Named for then-Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, it mandated that Israel prevent a hostile state calling for its annihilation from acquiring nuclear weapons.
- The plan in 1981 was to keep the strike secret, and Israel was not to take responsibility. But it was only weeks before Israeli elections, and taking credit proved too tempting for Begin. The Israeli operation aroused considerable irritation in Washington, and the U.S. response was to condemn the strike and embargo the delivery of a third F-16 squadron to Israel.
- Now, 38 years later, it appears Israel has once again carried out an attack on Iraqi territory. The Aug. 20 strike near Balad air base in Iraq was the fourth in a series of recent explosions on bases controlled by Iranian-backed Iraqi militias.
- The Aug. 20 strike near Balad air base in Iraq was the fourth in a series of recent explosions on bases controlled by Iranian-backed Iraqi militias.
- The explosions have targeted Iranian missile shipments as well as upgrade kits for advanced guidance. The rest of the incidents remain unattributed.
- Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is just three weeks away from elections, and his usual right-wing bloc appears to be lagging in the polls. When asked if Israel would strike Iranian targets in Iraq if needed, he declared, "We are operating—not just if needed, we are operating in many areas against a state that wants to annihilate us. Of course I gave the security forces a free hand and instructed them to do anything necessary to thwart Iran's plans." If not explicitly taking responsibility for last week's strikes, this is pretty close to it.
- Washington's response to the latest events was also similar to its reaction to the Israeli strike in 1981: leaking information regarding the responsible party and implicit condemnation. U.S. President Donald Trump has not done this directly, and it seems safe to assume that he was not surprised by the strikes and that they were coordinated with top figures in his administration, but other elements in the U.S. government appear displeased about alleged Israeli activity in Iraq, which they view as placing American soldiers stationed there at risk.
- To understand the logic behind the recent strikes, it is important to view them within the broader Israeli counter-effort to prevent Iran from deploying precision missiles, some accurate to a 15-foot to 30-foot radius, throughout the region for use against Israel. These weapons are considerably more dangerous than nonprecision missiles, which require firing massive quantities to hit their intended targets—if they ever do hit them. Iran seeks to provide thousands of advanced missiles with ranges from 100 to 600 miles to its allies in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.

- Israel sees advanced weapons being supplied to Iranian proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps forces in Syria as a strategic threat. Iran's determination to provide them and the U.S. dismay with Israeli activities to destroy them may force Israel to consider the extent to which it is willing to go in order to disrupt Iran's precision project—and if these weapons pose enough of a threat to be included in the Begin Doctrine, which previously covered only nuclear weapons.
- Capitalizing on the weakness of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad's government, which it had propped up throughout the civil war, Iran has sought to build another front against Israel on Syrian territory since 2017. But the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Maj. Gen. Qassem Suleimani, failed to take into account Israel's intelligence and air superiority in that theater, given its proximity to Syria. According to Israeli officials, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has launched [over 200 airstrikes](#) in Syria targeting Iranian weapons stockpiles and production facilities since 2017, sometimes exploiting Iranian attempts to strike Israel by launching extensive retaliatory campaigns and wiping out dozens of targets.
- Despite what appears to be a decisive Israeli victory in the first round of the Iranian struggle to entrench its forces in Syria from 2017 to 2018, Tehran remains determined and patient. It will try to learn lessons regarding Israeli capabilities and limitations and implement them in the future. More important, Iran will seek different venues that are less advantageous to Israel in order to advance its precision missile project.
- Iran will seek different venues that are less advantageous to Israel in order to advance its precision missile project.
- The latter approach has led Iran to move a significant portion of its missile-related activity to Lebanon—where it believes Israel is less inclined to strike so as to avoid instigating a conflict with Hezbollah—and Iraq.
- Iran gains several important advantages from operating in Iraq rather than in Syria. First, Iraq is farther from Israel's borders, and it has not been ranked by the Israeli defense establishment as a primary area of focus since Saddam Hussein's fall in 2003, so Iran presumes that Israel's intelligence and aerial superiority advantages there are not as great. Second, Israel has benefited from establishing and maintaining the precedent that it can strike Iranian targets in Syria without eliciting a response beyond anti-aircraft fire, but no such precedent exists in Iraq, and establishing one, as Israel might seek to do, is complex and fraught with risks of miscalculation.
- In contrast to when Israel set the rules of the game in Syria, the situation in Iraq is made far more complex by the fact that the landscape there includes countless hostile local actors as well as both U.S. and Iranian forces at a time when tensions between the two countries are extremely high. Third, the U.S. military forces stationed in Iraq present obvious targets for pro-Iranian militias seeking an alternative way to avenge airstrikes against them, which could cause tension in the U.S.-Israel relationship.
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- Yet, it is important not to overstate the benefits Iran reaps from shifting its missile activity to Iraq. If Israel is capable of collecting high-quality intelligence in Iraq and executing low-signature strikes, which the targeted groups initially preferred to deny by attributing them to human error and extreme weather conditions, then it appears to maintain considerable intelligence and aerial abilities.
- While the U.S. Defense Department appears irritated by the strikes, Trump may view them as attacks on shared enemies. Washington is certainly not interested in allowing pro-Iranian militias to subjugate Iraq and turn it into a missile launchpad or weapons supply hub for attacks against Israel. If Israel was able to establish a deconfliction mechanism in Syria with Russia, which is not an ally, it should seek to develop a more sophisticated and deeper mechanism for coordination and communication with its U.S. ally in Iraq.
- Finally, Iran has not signaled it is willing to escalate against U.S. forces either directly or through a proxy, likely because it views taking steps that could provoke a head-on conflict with the United States as an unacceptable risk, the occupant of the Oval Office as unpredictable (even if not inclined toward another war in the Middle East), and its deployment of precision missiles targeting Israel as secondary to the economic and nuclear challenges with which it is already seeking to cope.
- Iran's efforts to launch an [explosive drone attack](#) against Israel from Syrian territory last Saturday night—which the IDF preempted and foiled—may have been a response to the incidents in Iraq, providing a preliminary indication that Iran's reactions will not be directed at the United States.
- The toughest dilemma facing the next Israeli government, however, may be the Lebanese Hezbollah component of Iran's precision missile project. If Iranian-built facilities in Lebanon become operational so transfers through Iraq and Syria are no longer necessary, then Israel will be faced with an unenviable decision: either strike to disrupt Hezbollah's acquisition of dangerous weapons and incur a high risk of war in Lebanon, or seek to upgrade its missile defense capabilities (including systems such as Iron Dome, David's Sling, and the Arrow) and ensure that deterrence holds to reduce the likelihood of another Israel-Lebanon war.

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