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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

October 15, 2020

Ynet News

PM: Infection Rate Down but 'Few More Days' of Lockdown

Prime Minister Netanyahu said the **coronavirus** infection rate has "significantly" dropped but the gov't needs "few more days" before the lockdown could be eased. Netanyahu released a statement where he defended imposing a second national lockdown. He added that during the cabinet meeting, the gov't will discuss the possibility of reopening "small businesses that don't involve interaction with the public, kindergartens and take-away services at restaurants."

Netanyahu has been criticized for mismanaging the coronavirus crisis and accused of being unfit to rule while on trial for corruption charges. He is on trial for fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes for his role in a series of scandals, and the **demonstrators** have staged weekly gatherings for the past four months demanding that he step down. The marches have been fueled by the gov't response to the pandemic. [See also "Ultra-Orthodox-Netanyahu Alliance Threatened by COVID" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Times of Israel

First Settler Homes Since Suspending Annexation Approved

A Defense Ministry body advanced plans to build 2,166 settlement homes in the West Bank, the first new construction approved beyond the Green Line in 8 months. The approval was also the first since Netanyahu's project to annex all the West Bank settlements was indefinitely suspended last month as part of the Israel-UAE peace deal. The Civil Administration Higher Planning Committee gave final approval for 1,313 housing units, and okayed 853 homes for "deposit," an earlier planning stage they must clear. The Higher Planning Committee will convene again on Thursday to advance the construction of around 2,000 more homes. The approvals came less than a month after the UAE and Bahrain signed agreements to normalize relations with Israel, which in return pledged to freeze its plans to annex up to 30% of the West Bank. The **PA** condemned the move as "madness."

Reuters

Pompeo Urges Riyadh to Consider Normalizing with Israel

Secretary of State Pompeo urged Saudi Arabia to consider normalizing relations with Israel as he met with Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, also saying that Washington supports a "robust program of arms sales" to it. The U.S. is trying to persuade more Gulf countries to strike accords with Israel, as the UAE and Bahrain did at the Sept. 15. Riyadh has quietly acquiesced to the UAE and Bahrain deals – though it has stopped short of endorsing them – and has signaled it is not ready to take action itself. Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam drew up a 2002 initiative under which Arab nations offered to normalize ties in return for a statehood deal with the Palestinians and full Israeli withdrawal from territory captured in 1967. [See also "Israelis Most Want Ties with Saudi Arabia Next – Poll" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

PA Instructs Officials Not to Attack Arab Leaders, Countries

The PA instructed its official spokesmen and representatives around the world not to attack Arab leaders and Arab countries in the aftermath of the normalization agreements signed between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain. The instruction came after the PA ambassador to France launched an attack on Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, dubbing him a “little dictator who wants to make himself known.” The PA has repeatedly accused the UAE and Bahrain of stabbing the Palestinians in the back and betraying the Palestinian cause by signing the normalization accords. A PA official said that the Palestinian ambassador’s remarks against bin Zayed do not reflect the views of the Palestinian leadership. The PA Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in a statement, pointed out that PA President Abbas has “stressed the need to respect the persons and symbols of these countries and not to attack them in any way.” [See also “The Palestinians Need a New Strategy in Relations with Israel” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Netanyahu Won’t Reveal Secret Parts of UAE Deal in Knesset

Netanyahu has bowed to requests to appear before the Knesset to explain classified portions of the agreement with the UAE— but not before Thursday. But Netanyahu will present whatever secret parts there may be in the deal only next week to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee’s subcommittee on intelligence and secret services, committee sources said. Since before the deal was signed, committee chairman Zvi Hauser (Derech Eretz) has called on Netanyahu and Knesset Speaker to present the agreement in full to his panel. Hauser asked that Netanyahu at least discuss the deal with the committee members. The subcommittee comprises five members: Hauser, Moshe Ya’alon (Yesh Atid-Telem), Avigdor Liberman (Yisrael Beytenu) and Likud MKs Gideon Sa’ar and Avi Dichter. When Netanyahu went to Washington, Ya’alon posted a video on social media in which he said Netanyahu’s refusal to present the deal to the security cabinet or the Knesset was the way leaders behave in a dictatorship, not a democracy.

Hezbollah Rejects Lebanese Maritime Border Talks

Hezbollah today took issue with the Lebanese delegation chosen to participate in unprecedented talks with Israel over contested borders in the Mediterranean Sea. Representatives from Israel and Lebanon gathered for talks facilitated by the U.S. aimed at resolving a dispute over access to 330 square miles in the oil-rich waters. Both Middle Eastern countries are hoping to develop new gas fields in the Mediterranean. In a joint statement released hours before the talks were due to start today, Hezbollah and Amal, the country’s other main Shiite party, called for the negotiating team to be revised to include only members of the military. The talks were held at the headquarters of the UN peacekeeping mission in Lebanon in the Lebanese border town of Naqoura. A statement from the State Department described the meeting as “productive” and said both sides reaffirmed their commitment to reconvene later this month. [See also “Lebanon, Israel Hold Talks on Disputed Maritime Border” \(Reuters\)](#)

Sudanese Sovereignty Council to Normalize Ties with Israel

The Sudanese Sovereignty Council decided to go ahead with normalizing the country's ties with Israel, sources close to the Sudanese leadership told i24NEWS. A source close to the council said that after a heated discussion late on Wednesday, the council decided to yield to US pressure and forge formal ties with Israel. According to reports in Sudanese and Arab media outlets, Washington gave Sudan 24 hours to respond to an ultimatum demanding that Sudan recognizes Israel and normalizes its ties with the Jewish state in exchange for being removed from the US blacklist of terrorism supporters. As US and Israeli officials repeatedly vowed that more countries would join in on the normalization push, Sudan was speculated to be one of the likeliest countries to follow the UAE and Bahrain in normalizing relations. Earlier, it was reported that Prime Minister Netanyahu and Sovereignty Council chair Abdel Fattah al-Burhan were supposed to meet in the near future to discuss the prospect. Netanyahu already spoke with Burhan earlier this year during a surprise meeting in Uganda, which sparked a public outcry in Sudan. The Sudanese leadership has long appeared split on the prospect of normalizing ties with Israel -- a plan apparently backed by its military component, but not as much by the civilian one. [See also "Gantz: Our Hand Is Extended, It's About Time for Palestinians to Join Journey of Peace" \(I24 News\)](#)

Reuters

Turkish Arms Sales to Azerbaijan Surged Before Fighting

Turkey's military exports to its ally Azerbaijan have risen six-fold this year, with sales of drones and other military equipment rising to \$77m last month alone before fighting broke out over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, according to exports data. The figures compiled by the Turkish Exporters' Assembly, which groups more than 95,000 exporting companies in 61 sectors, show Azerbaijan bought \$123m in defense and aviation equipment from Turkey in the first 9 months of 2020. Most of the purchases of drones, rocket launchers, ammunition and other weapons arrived after July, when border clashes between Armenian and Azeri forces prompted Turkey and Azerbaijan to conduct joint military exercises. Sales jumped from \$278,880 July to \$36m in August, and \$77.1m in just September, the data showed. Military sales to Azerbaijan in the first 9 months of 2019 totaled \$20.7m. Fighting between Azeri and ethnic Armenian forces broke out on Sept. 27 over Nagorno-Karabakh, a mountain enclave which is recognized internationally as part of Azerbaijan but is governed and populated by ethnic Armenians. [See also "How Turkey Pushed for Azerbaijan's War on Armenia – Analysis" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Lebanese Contortions

By Shimrit Meir

- **How are negotiations over borders conducted with a country that does not recognize you and which occasionally tries to destroy you? The Lebanese are having trouble resolving that logical conundrum, and particularly so Hizbullah, without which the negotiations could never have been held, and which gave the green light for them. The members of the Lebanese delegation, under direct orders from the leadership, went out of their way to show that the negotiations are no precursor to either UAE-styled normalization or peace. They refused to pose for a joint photograph, despite American pressure, and insisted on speaking in Arabic and to make the talks more cumbersome because of the need for simultaneous translation. The head of the delegation, Brig. Gen. Bassam Yassin, a Shiite from southern Lebanon, was careful never to utter the word “Israel” in his comments.**
- **Nobody in Lebanon is buying that theater, and the Lebanese social media has been scornful of the clumsy efforts by the army and Hizbullah to have its cake and eat it too: “At their next meeting, they’ll for sure agree to a picture, but without smiles!” tweeted one journalist. Of course, the UAE jumped at the opportunity to point out the hypocrisy being shown by Lebanon, which just a few weeks ago had called the Emiratis traitors and who were now negotiating with Israel and implicitly recognizing it. Why has Hizbullah agreed to take those insults lying down? After the explosion in the Beirut port, it is hard for it to be perceived once again as thwarting the possibility of having Lebanon emerge from its economic ruin. The natural gas companies, mainly the French Total company, are knocking at the door, Hizbullah’s political partners are eager to join the party, and Hizbullah is not in a position to ruin it, especially since if the negotiations are successful, Hizbullah will be among those who benefit.**
- **The Israelis and the Americans have insisted that for the time being the discussions are only over the maritime border, and not the land border, saying that the question of Mt. Dov is not up for discussion. The Lebanese, alternatively, have said that they will insist that the arrangement extend to the maritime and the land borders. The danger is that holding negotiations on Mt. Dov, will conflict with the American recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights and is liable to increase the already heightened tensions between Israel and Hizbullah. There are some people in circles close to the US administration who are angry with the State Department for trying to rescue Lebanon from economic collapse instead of leveraging its weakness to strangle Hizbullah. That said, it is readily understandable why the Trump administration, in the twilight of its days, wants another picture that once again shows it as resolving conflicts in the Middle East peacefully, but it is hard to understand why everyone waited until now, with just a bit more than two weeks until the American elections. Even though the Americans would like to sew the matter up quickly, speed dating style, it will be difficult to reach an agreement, or even set real negotiations in motion, in such a short time. In other words, there is also the possibility that this issue will be on the next American president’s desk.**

When the Victimizer Plays the Victim

By Amihai Attali

- The wedding that was held last night in Givat Zeev captured the essence of everything that is wrong here. Naturally, we wish the young couple a good and happy life, but if they run their lives in the same way that the evening that began their joint life together was run, their children may not have a country to live in. The evening consisted of everything that is wrong and, absurdly enough, the Haredi MKs spent their time issuing a blitz of statements of condemnation. It wasn't the dozens of guests who partied in defiance of the directives whom they condemned; it wasn't the violence that was used against the police who came to put a stop to that incomprehensible event that they condemned; it wasn't the fact that once the police left the party resumed as if nothing had happened that they condemned. The Haredi politicians condemned the police.
- Nor did the Haredi MKs and ministers have anything to say about the brazen violation of the directives that was committed by their fellow minister [Gila Gamliel]. They were silent yet again when we learned that this same minister also allegedly had lied in the epidemiological contact tracing. They didn't utter a peep about the endless violations by members of the various Haredi communities. But when police officers who earn a salary of NIS 6,500 a month enter a coronavirus lair and find themselves being beaten by drunken revelers—that they condemn. Why? Because the celebrants were “one of ours.” They are most likely Shas voters, so Aryeh Deri felt compelled to speak. “I'm shocked. A joyful wedding ended with pictures of blood, with police leading family members with rifles,” he said. That's what Deri cares about, who was quoted yesterday on Kan Television News threatening a Haredi rebellion against the lockdown if no immediate arrangement were found to allow yeshivas to be reopened.
- Every day the Haredi MKs set new records for pettiness in the coronavirus crisis. They did virtually nothing to prevent the serial violations by entire communities, and they have invested all of their energy in closing ranks. Last night they were busy repeating the cry of the robbed Cossack [originally Yiddish phrase referring to a perpetrator who portrays himself as the victim] that was aired by the wedding celebrants. It is truly impossible to understand how they failed to grasp their faces in shock over what happened there. This wedding was clearly illegal; and it was immoral as well since it endangered the thousands of people who are going to come into contact with the dozens of people who were there. It was also an un-Jewish event that crudely trampled all of the Halachic commandments, such as “Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves” [Deuteronomy 4:15]. But Deri and his colleagues don't care about any of that. We need to know is that if we continue to leave the management of this event [the COVID-19 pandemic] and the decision-making in his hands, the children of the couple who were wed last night are going to find themselves living in a banana republic. And that's in the best- case scenario.