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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and Middle East News Update

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Headlines:

- Israel Parliament Ratifies Historic Peace Treaty with UAE
- Thousands Protest Demanding Netanyahu's Resignation
- 3,122 Settler Homes Approved on Day of Israel-UAE Vote
- Saudi FM Stresses Bringing Israel, Palestinians Into Talks
- US Air Force Trains with Israel's Newest F-35 Squadron
- Iran Admits Cyberattacks on Government Departments
- Turkish-Israel Trade on the Rise as Relations Hit Bottom
- Greece, Cyprus Seek More EU Pressure to Stop Turkey

Commentary:

- **Ma'ariv: "A Chorus Line"**
 - By Ben Caspit
- **Ma'ariv: "Nothing Beats the Sea"**
 - By Alon Ben David

News Excerpts

October 16, 2020

I24 News

Israel Parliament Ratifies Historic Peace Treaty with UAE

The Knesset officially ratified a historic normalization agreement signed between Israel and the UAE last month. The measure received overwhelming support from lawmakers, passing through the chamber in an 80 to 13 vote. In remarks delivered to Knesset before the vote commenced, Prime Minister Netanyahu said the landmark agreement proved that Jerusalem could pave a new path with the Arab world without having to first compromise with Ramallah. "The new order says you don't wait for the Palestinians to make peace," Netanyahu quipped. "This deal brings Arab and Muslim countries closer to us, who have formed a united front against Iran." "History has taught us that strength brings security, strength brings allies, and ultimately -- this is something President Trump said again and again -- ultimately, strength brings peace," he added. [See also "PM: Successful Lebanon maritime talks could be first step to 'true peace'" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ynet News

Thousands Protest Demanding Netanyahu's Resignation

Thousands of demonstrators protested in various locations demanding Netanyahu's resignation due to his indictments and his handling of the coronavirus crisis. Protests' organizers claimed rallies are expected to see a large turnout but warned that Netanyahu's [supporters](#) also circulated a call to confront the protesters. A group of Likud supporters in Holon held a counter-protest in support of Netanyahu. Activists of the far-right group La Familia had arrived at the scene and attacked protesters, spraying them with an unknown gas. Clashes between demonstrators and Likud supporters have become increasingly violent. Some protesters accused Netanyahu of not condemning violence against them and also directed their ire at his coalition partner, Benny Gantz, for not taking a harsher stance against the violence. [See also "Submarine Scandal Keeps Haunting Netanyahu" \(AI-Monitor\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

3,122 Settler Homes Approved on Day of Israel-UAE Vote

Israel advanced and approved plans for 3,122 [settler homes](#), thereby putting a temporary end to claims that a de facto freeze on such activity existed. The Higher Planning Council for Judea and Samaria approvals marked the end of a two-day meeting during which 5,288 plans were approved or [advanced](#). The approvals, which the Left has characterize as de facto annexation, took place as the Knesset passed a historical peace deal with the UAE, which had required Israel to suspend West Bank annexation. But the text of the UAE deal the Knesset debated also gives tacit support to President Trump's "Vision for Peace," which allows for such annexation and for the creation of a demilitarized Palestinian state. [See also "Israel Denies Visas to UN Human Rights Staff After Settlement Blacklist" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Reuters

Saudi FM Stresses Bringing Israel, Palestinians Into Talks

The main focus of Middle East peace efforts should be to bring Israel and the Palestinians back to the negotiating table, Saudi foreign minister Faisal Al Saud said in a comment suggesting that Israeli-Saudi normalization is unlikely any time soon. "I believe that the focus now needs to be on getting the Palestinians and the Israelis back to the negotiating table. In the end, the only thing that can deliver lasting peace and lasting stability is an agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis," speaking to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy think tank, the foreign minister also said he hoped it may soon be possible to resolve a dispute that led Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt to sever political, trade and transport ties with Qatar in mid-2017. The four accused Qatar of supporting terrorism and cozying up to regional foe Iran. Doha denies the charges and says the embargo aims to undermine its sovereignty. [See also "Nearly 80% of Saudis in Favor of Normalization with Israel – Poll" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Al-Monitor

US Air Force Trains with Israel's Newest F-35 Squadron

US and Israeli F-35 fighter aircraft took to the skies over southern Israel for the third such combined training exercise this year. The exercise, Enduring Lightning III, involved Israeli and US variants of the stealth F-35 Joint Strike Fighter conducting simulated combat with mock ground and air targets, the US Air Force said in a statement. US expeditionary air squadrons out of Utah and Qatar's al-Udeid Air Base took part in the exercise, along with a KC-10 extender and a KC-135 Stratotanker, which conducted midair refueling. This installment of Enduring Lightning III also involved Israel's second and newest F-35 unit, the 116th combat squadron, dubbed the "Lions of the South" and declared operational in August. Israeli F-16s from the Israeli air force's 115th Squadron also served as mock enemy fighters during the drills. Israel was the first country to join the United States' F-35 program and has planned to buy up to 50 of the aircraft in the years to come. The training comes in the wake of a failed US push for a renewal of the international arms embargo on Iran at the United Nations.

Ynet News

Iran Admits Cyberattacks on Government Departments

Iran's cybersecurity authority acknowledged cyberattacks on two governmental departments this week, state media reported. While the report did not say which departments were targeted, it called the attacks "important" and said some other departments temporarily took down their online services as a precaution against further attacks. Iran occasionally says it has thwarted cyberattacks on its infrastructure, although it has disconnected much of its infrastructure from the internet after the Stuxnet computer virus, widely believed to be a joint U.S.-Israeli creation, disrupted thousands of Iranian centrifuges in the country's nuclear sites in the late 2000s. Iran was behind an attempt earlier this year to attack into Israel's water system, aiming to paralyze the sewage systems and disrupt the water supply for farming at the height of the pandemic. Israel reportedly responded by carrying out a cyberattack on computers at Shahid Rajaei port, causing massive backups on waterways and roads leading to the state-of-the-art facility.

Turkish-Israel Trade on the Rise as Relations Hit Bottom

The frayed diplomatic relationship between Israel and Turkey does not seem to be damaging trade ties between the two Eastern Mediterranean states. But it does create a deepening public shadow. Antagonistic government statements, currently the norm, provide glimpses into diplomatic crisis after diplomatic crisis. Yet shared commercial interests are creating a foundation upon which to build relationships between the two states. This month, an 18-day virtual trade mission for the food and beverage industry, organized by ASHIB, Turkey's Mediterranean Aquatic and Animal Products Exporters Association, is attracting interest from a range of Israeli companies including supermarkets, retailers, importers and manufacturers seeking the best in Turkish food, beverages, fruits and vegetables. Historically, Israel runs a trade deficit with Turkey, except for 2013 and 2014 when the Jewish state had small trade surpluses. Since then, the value of Turkish exports has been more than twice that of its imports from Israel. In 2019, Israel's exports to Turkey were led by chemical products with almost a 50% share, followed by plastics (12%) and fuel (9%), the Israel Export Institute's figures show.

Greece, Cyprus Seek More EU Pressure to Stop Turkey

Greece and Cyprus pushed for a tougher EU response to Turkey's natural gas exploration in contested Mediterranean waters at an EU summit, after Ankara restarted operations of a survey ship. Two weeks after their last summit where leaders discussed economic sanctions, the EU has so far failed to persuade Ankara to stop exploring in waters disputed by Greece and Cyprus. France and Germany said that [Turkey](#) had only "weeks" to revise its stance and stop what they also said were provocations but declined to give a strong ultimatum as Athens and Nicosia would like. EU leaders had agreed on Oct. 2 to give Turkey until early December before considering economic sanctions and Germany, which has so far led diplomatic talks with Ankara, wants to give dialogue a chance because of close EU-Turkey trade ties. Cyprus is frustrated that, in addition to the Turkish exploration ship off a Greek island, Turkey has sent another vessel to Cyprus's economic zone to conduct seismic surveys. Cyprus is also furious that Turkish Cypriot authorities have partially reopened the beach town of Varosha, a former resort area fenced off and abandoned in no-man's land since a 1974 Turkish invasion that split the island. [See also "Senate Democrats Urge Library of Congress to Recognize Armenian Genocide" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

A Chorus Line

By Ben Caspit

- **Another episode in the never-ending show to which we've been subjected over the past few months was aired this week on Hahadashot. The show has one purpose, and one purpose only: to keep bringing the structure closer to collapse and to cut off the foundations of what remains of the Israeli kingdom. To keep grinding the last vestiges of the public's trust in the establishment. To undermine and destroy it all, just so that the defendant manages to evade justice. Yes, I'm talking about the recordings of Avichai Mandelblit and Efi Naveh. The chorus line immediately called for the predictable demands: Mandelblit must be taken into custody immediately until the end of the proceedings, the indictments of the prime minister must be rescinded, the Netanyahu must be awarded another million shekels for needless emotional distress, and honorary doctorates must be awarded to Yair Netanyahu, Yaakov Bardugo and MK Osnat Mark. Here's the deal: it was appropriate to report this.**
- **It's fascinating to hear. The noise and the commotion are unnecessary and overblown. The causal connection between the situation described in the recording and the investigations into Netanyahu makes about as much sense as the possibility of the Missus donating her salary to the New Israel Fund. Anyone who's familiar with the particulars of that time understands exactly what happened. Avichai Mandelblit was traumatized by the investigations into the Harpaz affair. He was humiliated, he suffered, he was accused, he was in agony and groaning in an imaginary case that should have never been initiated. An affair that drove an entire country mad also turned the life of the man who was the judge advocate general with the rank of major general into a Kafkaesque nightmare.**
- **Subsequently he was cleared. The case was closed, the five justices on the High Court of Justice ruled unanimously that his conduct had been flawless. He was also appointed attorney general. Google what was said about him by the man who appointed him, a certain Binyamin Netanyahu. According to Netanyahu's statements, Mandelblit is not only the ultimate attorney general, he's also a Righteous Among the Nations. But Mandelblit wanted his case to be closed "for lack of guilt." He knows what the difference is between lack of guilt and "lack of evidence." He wanted to keep the option of being on the Supreme Court someday. The problem is that during the same stage, when he was attorney general, a bizarre situation occurred: the one who was supposed to determine why the case was closed was then-state attorney Shai Nitzan, and Nitzan was Mandelblit's subordinate.**
- **So, let's talk for a minute about Nitzan: he too was praised and acclaimed by the very same prime minister (Netanyahu) when he was appointed to his post. Bibi was also the first to call and congratulate Nitzan. He didn't imagine that a few years later, [the prime minister's] followers would declare him an outcast and call him a "radical leftist" (no, Nitzan has nothing to do with the left, and he's definitely not radical). But Nitzan didn't**

feel good about the possibility that he would decide the reason for closing the case against Mandelblit.

- After all, he was his subordinate. If Nitzan were to accede to Mandelblit's request, I suspect that one of Balfour Street's mouthpieces would have gone on one news broadcast or another (I'm betting Channel 13's Shishi) and revealed in astonishment "Nitzan closed Mandelblit's case," and the flagrant conflicts of interest in a subordinate doing a shady deal to have his boss's case closed on favorable grounds. Shai Nitzan was right. But so was Mandelblit. He went through drawn-out legal proceedings. He was completely exonerated.
- So, when talking with a friend, he spoke the way he did. The way we all talk with friends. It continued with Mandelblit's attorneys officially contacting the Justice Ministry, a long meeting with the ministry's senior staff (the details of which have since been revealed), and so on. But now this is the foundation upon which the chorus of mouthpieces is building the unbelievable assertion that "Shai Nitzan extorted Mandelblit." Why would he extort him? What for? When exactly did Nitzan supposedly "mark" Netanyahu as the enemy of mankind who must be imprisoned? Forget that noise, those are unimportant details. He committed extortion, the cases were rigged, Netanyahu's a saint, and Mandelblit, Roni Alsheich and Shai Nitzan must be put on trial.

Nothing Beats the Sea

By Alon Ben David

- **The current lockdown, with its unfounded restrictions, drove many Israelis to rediscover the wonders of the sea: it's cleansing, refreshing, and the dirt that people try to bury there tends to come back. The filth from the submarine affair refuses to sink too, and this week it surfaced again. We all should have been shaken by the stench wafting from it, the stench of corruption tainting the holy of holies of Israeli security, but it seems that we're more interested in seeing Berko versus Mahluf and Miri versus Berko. From the moment it burst into our lives four years ago, this affair has revealed corruption that cries out to heaven, the kind that would have shaken even South American banana republics. A corrupt gang, with the prime minister's halo hovering above it, has allegedly managed to profit off of Israel's defense procurements. It was an incident that should have made every citizen fidget, certainly the officials in the law enforcement agencies. Nevertheless, the State Attorney's Office, which knew how to rapidly clear the prime minister of any suspicion without even questioning him, is still dragging its feet and has not laid down any indictments in the affair four years later.**
- **Let's try to make some sense out of the complex affair, whose very name ("the submarine affair") does it an injustice. The first part of the conspiracy was the decision to purchase a sixth submarine for the Israel Navy, which was made in 2009 under Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and then-defense minister Ehud Barak. The decision itself was to exercise an option in the agreement to procure the earlier submarines, which is completely reasonable. It may not have been made by the Navy and the IDF, but that's how it was when the previous submarines were procured, too. Over the years, the IDF was strict about treating the submarines and their strategic purpose as the domain of the political establishment, and it always objected in order to guarantee that the funding for those pricey tools would come from a budget outside of the defense budget.**
- **What should have set off a red light back then was the German shipyard's insistence on rejecting the man who had served as Israel's "trustee" until then, Air Force veteran Shaike Barkat, and on appointing Mickey Ganor instead. The "trustee" is actually an agent on the shipyard's behalf who reconciles any disagreements it has with the navy about such a complex procurement project, and it also clips a nice coupon—about three percent of every deal (a submarine costs about EUR 500 million). The very use of an agent in procurement deals that governments conclude is an invitation to corruption and is a custom that ought to be done away with. Concurrently, Germany asked Israel for its consent to sell two submarines of a similar but inferior class to Egypt. The Germans were under no obligation to get Israel's permission for the deal, but they went beyond the letter of the law and in keeping with their historic commitment not to sell weapons that were likely to pose an existential threat to Israel one day. The navy did not object to the sale to Egypt, although it did have a few reservations, and the decision was made in a proper procedure.**

- Seven years later, Israel decided to procure three more submarines, which was also completely reasonable, but it made the decision without any proper procedure. This decision took the defense minister and the IDF top brass by surprise, and it was presented as a recommendation by the National Security Council, which at the time was led by Avriel Bar-Yosef, a Navy veteran and good friend of Ganor's. At the same time, the prime minister consented to Germany's selling two additional submarines to Egypt. This time the submarines were more advanced, and he concealed the decision from all of the highest-ranking members of the diplomatic and security establishments. Israel does need three additional submarines. The older Dolphin-class submarines will reach the end of their lives in the course of the next decade, and we have to move forward right now and sign a contract to acquire new ones to replace them. For that reason, it's unclear why the prime minister acted in the dark, who profited from the sale of the submarines to Egypt, and what the prime minister had that he wanted to conceal.
- Things get complicated when you get to the affair of the defensive vessels. For two decades, the Navy has been mulling over how to replenish its aging fleet of surface vessels. The Mediterranean gas fields were discovered about a decade ago, and the Navy found the ultimate reason: ships to defend the exclusive economic zone. The Navy did orderly preparatory work about the need [for the ships], the IDF approved it, and the Defense Ministry issued a procurement tender for four 1,200-ton patrol ships. Shipyards from South Korea, Italy and Spain bid on the tender, but none from Germany did. As it happens, Israel Shipyards was capable of building ships that size too. The prime minister's attorney, David Shimron, who was not known back then to be Ganor's lawyer, pressured the Defense Ministry and had the tender canceled. Instead, Israel set out to acquire four larger and more expensive 2,000-ton ships from the German company ThyssenKrupp at a total cost of EUR 430 million (plus hundreds of millions of shekels for the cost of the weapons systems).
- When he was still a state's witness, Ganor confessed that it was Shimron who had had the tender canceled. Defense Ministry officials smelled the stench, and in spite of it, they supported the controversial procurement decision because they knew that the funding would come from the gas money. Navy officials know how to argue the need for the new ships very well, and there's no reason to question their motives. It would also be improper for this affair to cast a pall on the Navy's wonderful troops, whose tough service has become even more grueling under the coronavirus-related restrictions. The aspersion is being cast on our law enforcement agencies. It's been four years since the naval vessels affair was uncovered, which is shaping up to be one of the most serious affairs in our history based just on what has been reported, and the State Attorney's Office is still dragging its feet. This deathly stench must be decontaminated, if only to remove any blemish from the men and women in white [the color of the Israel Navy's uniforms].