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## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Friday, October 2*

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# News Excerpts

October 2, 2020

## Jerusalem Post

### **Netanyahu's Trial May Be Delayed**

The Jerusalem District Court may delay the start of Prime Minister [Netanyahu's trial](#), which is slated to begin in early January. The court's order extended Netanyahu's time to formally respond to the public corruption indictment against him from 10/18 until 11/29. Netanyahu opened a new front in his legal battles, telling the Court he could not formally respond to the public corruption indictment against him until the judges compel the state prosecution to turn over the missing evidence he has requested. In the background were two key dates. The court recently scheduled a hearing to decide disputes between the sides about alleged missing evidence only for 11/15. The move by Netanyahu's lawyers appeared to be an attempt to gain some leverage in the battle over additional internal prosecution documents relating to alleged coercion of state's witnesses. [See also "Anti-Netanyahu Protesters Hold 1,000 Demonstrations Throughout Israel" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## I24 News

### **Mossad Chief Yossi Cohen Holds Security Talks in Bahrain**

The head of Israel's famed spy agency (Mossad), Yossi Cohen, visited the Kingdom of Bahrain to hold talks with a number of high-ranking security officials, according to Gulf media sources. During his visit, Cohen reportedly met with Bahraini security chiefs Lt. General Adel bin Khalifa Al-Fadil and Sheikh Ahmed bin Abdulaziz Al Khalifa. According to the official Bahrain News Agency (BNA), the two sides discussed issues of common interest and underlined the importance of the recently signed Abraham Accords. BNA reported that the two sides agreed to work on issues that "will contribute significantly to the promotion of stability and defend the values of peace in the region." "This agreement will open up horizons of cooperation between the two countries," the outlet added. [See also "UAE, US and Israel to Develop Joint Energy Strategy, Say Ministers" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## Al-Monitor

### **Armenia Recalls Israel Envoy Over Arms Sales to Azerbaijan**

Armenia recalled its ambassador to Israel, issuing a rare diplomatic rebuke over Israel's arm sales to rival Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's military deployed Israeli-made drones against Armenian forces during the heavy fighting that erupted in the breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region, according to an Azerbaijani official. The two former Soviet republics are locked in their worst round of violence in years. More than 100 have died this week in the contested territory, which is officially part of Azerbaijan but run by ethnic Armenians backed by Yerevan. Israel has not taken a side, but does consider Azerbaijan to be a strategic ally. According to [the Times of Israel](#), it is believed that Israel supplies 60% of the Azerbaijani military's weaponry. [See also "Turkey rebuffs Russia, France and U.S. over Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire moves" \(Reuters\)](#)

## **'Jerusalem Is Our City,' Turkey's Erdogan Declares**

Turkish President Erdoğan implied that Jerusalem belongs to Turkey, referring to the Ottoman Empire's control over the city for much of the modern era. "In this city that we had to leave in tears during the First World War, it is still possible to come across traces of the Ottoman resistance. So Jerusalem is our city, a city from us," he told Turkish lawmakers during a major policy speech in Ankara. "Al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock are the symbolic mosques of our faith. In addition, this city is home to the holy places of Christianity and Judaism." The Ottoman Empire ruled over Jerusalem from 1516 to 1917. Modern Turkey has long stressed its enduring connection to the holy city, regularly condemning Israel's alleged efforts to "judaize" it and the US administration's recognition of it as Israel's capital. Jerusalem has been the capital of Israel since the country's founding, and the Jewish people have thousands of years of history in the city, backed up by extensive archaeological finds. [See also "Armenian PM Says Turkey Taking New Genocidal Path" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Reuters

## **Lebanon & Israel Agree to Talks to End Sea Border Dispute**

Lebanon and Israel have agreed to a framework for U.S.-mediated talks aimed at ending a long-running dispute along the border between the two nations that have fought several conflicts. Still in a formal state of war, Lebanon and Israel have contested their land and maritime borders for decades, namely over an area in the sea on the edge of three Lebanese offshore energy blocks. Israel said the talks would cover the sea border. Washington has mediated between the two sides. "This is a framework agreement, not a final one," Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri told reporters, less than a month after the U.S. imposed sanctions on his top aide for corruption and financially enabling [Hezbollah](#). The State Department welcomed the agreement and said it had taken 3 years of diplomacy to achieve. Talks will begin in the week of 10/12, David Schenker, Assistant Sec. of State for Near Eastern Affairs, told reporters, adding that he will represent the U.S. in the negotiations. [See also "In First Direct Talks in 30 Years, Israel, Lebanon Agree to Negotiate Maritime Border" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Ynet News

## **Syria Affirms Opposition to 'all Agreements with Israel'**

Syria affirmed that it remains staunchly opposed to any normalization agreements with Israel, hours after Lebanon announced it reached an agreement with Jerusalem to enter UN-mediated talks regarding a dispute over land and maritime borders. A source in the Syrian Foreign Ministry told the official SANA news agency that Syria "was and will remain against any agreements or treaties with the Israeli enemy based on its firm conviction that such agreements harm Arab causes in general, foremost among which is the Palestinian cause, which has been proven by previous experiences, that normalization and signing treaties and agreements with this enemy only increased its arrogance and obstinacy." This was also the country's first official response to Israel's recently signed U.S.-brokered agreements with the UAE and Bahrain.

## **US, UAE Press Ahead to Broker Israel-Sudan Deal**

Three Sudanese parties held a joint conference in Khartoum calling on the regime to accept an American deal for normalizing ties with Israel. "The American proposal is limited to the upcoming US presidential elections, and we shouldn't miss this historic opportunity. After announcement of the results of the elections, we will enter into a major crisis in Sudan if we don't agree to the offer made in the Emirates. Sudan will not be removed from the terrorism list for many years if we don't take advantage of the existing opportunity," said Mubarak al-Fadel, head of the Umma party. For Jerusalem, the joint press conference reinforced impressions over Khartoum's willingness to close a deal soon. A senior Israeli diplomat told Al-Monitor that the ball is now in Sudan's court. Khartoum must now decide whether or not to accept the proposal made by American officials in Abu Dhabi some 10 days ago for a quadruple package deal. The deal in the works is far from simple: Israel will achieve ties with a strategically important African country on the shores of the Red Sea; the U.S. will get a reinforced transitional regime in a country emerging from years of dictatorship; Sudan will be erased from the list of countries sponsoring terrorism and will also receive generous financial aid; and UAE will receive diplomatic glory over mediating such a deal, along with a hefty bill to pay.

## **US Defense Chief's Algeria Visit Points to Sahel Threats**

Secretary of Defense Mark Esper made a rare visit to Algeria for talks with the president about war-torn Libya and the troubled Sahel region to the south of the Sahara. Both countries are alarmed by the threat posed by Islamist militant groups in North Africa and the Sahel, and Algeria is weighing a more active military role against them outside its own borders. Esper and The Pentagon said Esper voiced support for expanding military relations with Algeria during the meeting. Esper's visit is the first to Algeria since Donald Rumsfeld's in 2006 and he is also the most senior American official yet to meet Tebboune. Tebboune took office in December after mass protests last year led the army to push his predecessor Abdelaziz Bouteflika to step down after 20 years in power. The new president has proposed changes to the constitution aimed at mollifying the opposition protest movement, but the reforms would also give the army new powers to intervene in neighboring states. An Algerian source said the talks were expected to focus on Libya, where nine years of chaos after the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi have created space for militants, and Mali, where French troops are trying to help quell an Islamist insurgency. "Algeria has an influence in Mali. It showed it can help. The Americans understood that French military intervention did not curb terrorism," a senior Algerian security source told Reuters.

## **Could Netanyahu's Days be Numbered?**

By Yossi Beilin

- It stands to reason that a prime minister indicted for serious crimes would resign his post and dedicate himself to clearing his name. But there is also logic in the argument put forth by Galit Distel Etebaryan: Assuming Netanyahu is innocent and the grave accusations against him are baseless, if he accepts a plea bargain and agrees to step down, he could be hurt twice: a mark of shame for the rest of his life and conceding the most important position in Israel. For Netanyahu to consent, or push for a plea deal, as he was advised by his late attorney, Yaakov Weinroth, he needs to know, in his heart of hearts, that he is not innocent, or believe the justice system in Israel is rotten and he has no chance of receiving a fair trial.
- Because a deal of this sort includes an admission of guilt, and because it can be done at a later stage of the legal process, and because relinquishing the premiership would be his most important bargaining chip for a convenient plea deal, it makes sense for the prime minister to hold on to this chip until he is convinced his trial is headed toward a conviction. Amid this backdrop, we can understand the calls (rather few, for the time being) from the right for the prime minister to accept a plea deal and not repeat Moshe Katzav's dire mistake of rejecting a plea deal that could have spared him prison time. From the perspective of the right, which hasn't forgotten his declaration of rapprochement with Yasser Arafat, the Hebron Agreement and his speech at Bar-Ilan University, Netanyahu is a far cry from Yitzhak Shamir. His excitement for the Trump plan, which proposes a Palestinian state in 70% of the West Bank and another 14% of sovereign Israeli territory, rather exacerbates this lack of enthusiasm. Not to mention the recent polls indicating the rise of another right-wing leader, much younger and supposedly far more committed to applying Israeli sovereignty and rejecting this type of peace deal.
- The liberal camp in the government and Knesset, which spearheaded the call for Netanyahu's resignation in recent years because of suspicions, which became indictments, is in a completely different situation. The election results created a situation where the Right and ultra-Orthodox lacked the mandates to form a government. To establish a Netanyahu-led government, therefore, the Likud had to pay a heavy price by offering Blue and White equality and a rotation. Blue and White's decision to join the coalition and its willingness to forego its flagship goal of removing Netanyahu, swallowing its pride over the indignity of not being informed of the normalization deals with the UAE and Bahrain; not being invited to the signing ceremonies in Washington; or not involving its members in the decision to appoint Prof. Ronni Gamzu as corona commissioner; stems from the fact that any other candidate from the right can form a government without it -- with no veto right and no rotation on the horizon. The question is whether Netanyahu will be able to handle, for an extended period of time, being flanked from left and right.

## **Not a Peace Agreement**

By Alex Fishman

- **These are not signs of peace, not normalization and not even signs of potential gas finds. What stands behind the Lebanese consent to renew the talks with Israel on the maritime border are only signs of hunger, economic distress and social and political disintegration in the Land of the Cedars. Over the past decade, Israel and Lebanon have been conducting discussions on the disputed maritime territory, which is known as Block 9; it covers an area of 850 square kilometers. Israel searched for an American-brokered compromise, due to the fact that if this were to be done through the UN institutions, there are high chances of Israel's losing territory, whereas the Lebanese demanded international arbitration through the UN, with the Americans only serving as observers. Moreover, Lebanon wanted to link the demarcation of the maritime border with revisions to the current land border line with Israel, which is unacceptable to the Lebanese government and mainly unacceptable to Hizbullah.**
- **As early as 2012, Israel was willing to hand over to Lebanon, as a compromise, over 50 percent of Block 9. The Lebanese—actually, Hizbullah—refused. Since then, the Lebanese have tried to sign contracts for gas exploration with international companies—from France, Italy and mainly Russia—but Israel made it clear to these companies that there was no point in beginning drilling, and they backed out. At the start of 2019, the Lebanese government, headed at the time by Hariri, was facing an economic crisis, and the issue was on the table again. Hizbullah, which viewed the gas profits as a solution to its own economic distress, also backed down for the first time, and gave the Lebanese government a green light to negotiate with Israel, detaching the issue of the maritime border from the dispute over marking the land border.**
- **For Israel, this was an achievement. Particularly due to the fact that the mediator was the US, in the presence of the UN, rather than the opposite. Since then, initial contacts have been ongoing, with an eye to launching talks. Over the course of the past year, the Lebanese economy has crashed. The need to arrive at a quick arrangement that will enable the start of gas explorations, which could fill the treasury of the state and of Hizbullah, has become urgent. The potential of off-shore gas is the only asset that Lebanon can present today as a guarantee for receiving economic aid from the world. For Israel, it is a good opportunity to reach the compromise that it has been seeking for the past decade.**
- **Such an agreement could have long-term strategic ramifications. It could, for example, create regional cooperation for exporting gas to Europe. Beyond this, logic indicates that if negotiations are being held that are so important to Lebanon, Hizbullah will maintain a state of calm on the border at least in the short term. But as of now, there are no signs, certainly not in Nasrallah's speech this week, to indicate that Hizbullah is lowering the level of tension on the border.**