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Israel and Middle East News Update

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Headlines:

- **Knesset Speaker Disqualifies Vote to Probe Netanyahu**
- **Ministers Fail to Agree on Lockdown Exit Strategy**
- **Tunnel Found Along Gaza Border Belonged to Hamas - IDF**
- **Cop Who Killed Palestinian with Autism Faces Charges**
- **Pompeo Says Hopes Sudan Will Recognize Israel 'Quickly'**
- **US Intelligence: Iran Tried to Interfere in 2020 US Election**
- **US to Declare Amnesty, NGO's Antisemitic**
- **Turkey Extends Exploration in Disputed Waters**

Commentary:

- **Yedioth Ahronoth: "Transparent Normalization"**
- By Smadar Peri
- **Yedioth Ahronoth: "Nasrallah has a Score to Settle"**
- By Alex Fishman

News Excerpts

October 22, 2020

Al-Monitor

Knesset Speaker Disqualifies Vote to Probe Netanyahu

Knesset speaker Yariv Levin nullified the results of a vote on forming a parliamentary inquiry into a corruption scandal known as the submarine affair, provoking strong condemnation from the opposition. After the decision, Prime Minister Netanyahu ordered a second vote be held, but the opposition decided to boycott the vote, and the proposal was rejected. Proposals to probe the submarine affair have surfaced more than once. Several associates of Netanyahu have been investigated in relation to the affair, which concerns Israel's purchase of submarines and war ships. Some of those investigated had already been indicted for corruption and bribery in the affair dubbed Case 3,000, including Netanyahu's lawyer and cousin. Many in Israel feel that investigation did not go deep enough into Netanyahu's links to the scandal. [See also "Netanyahu Plunged to New Depths in Submarine Scandal Vote" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Ynet News

Ministers Fail to Agree on Lockdown Exit Strategy

After 6 hours of deliberations, ministers failed to reach a decision on the next steps in the move out of Israel's coronavirus lockdown. The cabinet agreed that a final decision regarding the reopening of schools and shops will be made next week. Netanyahu proposed that the exit strategy, currently consisting of 9 stages, should be reduced to 5, to be made every 2 weeks after morbidity rates are reviewed, in order to ensure a renewed upsurge of cases is not caused by any of the steps taken. Coronavirus czar Ronni Gamzuv warned that exiting the lockdown should be done in a more gradual manner. The exit strategy's second stage, which was to come into effect Sunday, if the rate of infection remains low, and the number of new daily cases does not exceed 1,000, was scheduled to include the opening of grades 1-4, allow non-medical treatments and alternative medicine services.

Jerusalem Post

Tunnel Found Along Gaza Border Belonged to Hamas - IDF

The terror tunnel found along the border with the Gaza Strip belonged to the Hamas terrorist movement, the IDF announced. The tunnel, which was dug from the Khan Younis area in the Strip, was found by an underground fence used by the IDF, according to the commander of the Gaza Division. Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi stated that the exposure of the tunnel showed that "the threats have not disappeared,". IDF Spokesman emphasized on that "the tunnel was still in the process of being built, so that at no point did it pose a danger to the surrounding towns. It will be neutralized in the next few days." Hours after the exposure of the tunnel was announced, a rocket was fired from the Gaza Strip towards southern Israel. The IDF responded to the attack by striking underground infrastructure belonging to Hamas. [See also "Mr. Security' Netanyahu Discovers: Security Last Thing on Israelis' Minds" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Cop Who Killed Palestinian with Autism Faces Charges

A Border Police officer who shot and killed an autistic Palestinian man in Jerusalem's Old City in May after mistaking him for a terrorist could be tried for reckless manslaughter, the Justice Ministry's Police Internal Investigations Department announced. The family of Iyad Halak, 31, criticized the decision, saying that it did not go far enough. Over a summer in which police conduct has become a subject of constant debate, Halak has emerged for some as a symbol of police brutality. Others, including Public Security Minister Amir Ohana, have defended police as simply doing their best in the tense atmosphere of Jerusalem's Old City, which has seen numerous terror attacks. A pre-trial hearing will be held before charges are filed against the shooter, the PIID said. If convicted on charges of reckless manslaughter, the officer could serve up to 12 years in prison. The shooting officer's commander, who both participated in the chase of Iyad and was present at the shooting, will not be charged. [See also "Why Israelis Care About the Killing of an Autistic Palestinian, but Are Silent About Others" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Pompeo Says Hopes Sudan Will Recognize Israel 'Quickly'

Secretary of State Pompeo said he hoped Sudan would soon recognize Israel, as Washington prepared to remove [Sudan](#) as a state sponsor of terrorism, with Washington hoping to make a dramatic peace announcement in the coming days. The US sanctions originally date back to the 1990s when Sudan was run by then-President Omar al-Bashir, who was overthrown in 2019, effectively keeping Khartoum out of the global banking system. A source close to the Sudanese Sovereignty Council told i24NEWS that the council decided to yield to US pressure and forge formal ties with Israel. According to various reports, the Trump administration gave Sudan 24 hours to respond to an ultimatum demanding that Khartoum recognize the Jewish state and [normalize its ties with Israel](#) in exchange for being removed from the US blacklist of terrorism supporters. [See also "Israeli Delegation Travels to Sudan to Discuss Normalization - Israeli Radio Kan" \(Reuters\)](#)

US Intelligence: Iran Tried to Interfere in 2020 US Election

Iran is responsible for emails meant to intimidate American voters and sow unrest in multiple states, US intelligence officials said calling out both Tehran and Russia for activities meant to interfere in the upcoming presidential election. The announcement underscored the concern within the US government about efforts by foreign countries to spread false information meant to suppress voter turnout and undermine American confidence in the vote. Both countries have also obtained voter registration information, though such data is considered easily accessible. Despite the Iranian and Russian actions, the officials said Americans can be confident that their vote will be counted. While state-backed Russian hackers are known to have infiltrated US election infrastructure in 2016, there is no evidence that Iran has ever done so. Cybersecurity experts consider it to be a second-rate actor in online espionage. [See also "No More Un Embargo on Iran, but No Arms Sales Either" \(AI-Monitor\)](#)

US to Declare Amnesty, NGO's Antisemitic

The Trump administration is to declare major international Human Rights NGOs Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Oxfam as antisemitic, voicing that governments should not support them any longer. If the declaration happens, it is likely to cause an uproar among civil society groups and might incite litigation. Critics of the possible move also worry it could lead other governments to further crack down on such groups, according to [Politico](#). T'ruah, a rabbinic human rights organization that represents over 2,000 rabbis, responded to the allegation, saying that "any US government declaration that these groups are antisemitic for criticizing the Israeli government is ridiculous, and contributes to the silencing of Israel's human rights defenders." the declaration is expected to take the form of a report from the office of Elan Carr, the US special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism. It would declare that it is US policy not to support such groups, including financially, and urge other governments to cease their support. The report would cite such groups' alleged or perceived support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, which has targeted Israel over its construction of settlements on land Palestinians claim for a future state.

Turkey Extends Exploration in Disputed Waters

Turkey said it extended the stay of its Oruc Reis survey vessel and 2 other ships in a disputed area of the eastern Mediterranean until Oct. 27. 2 other vessels, the Ataman and Cengiz Han along with Oruc Reis will continue work in an area southeast of the Greek island of Rhodes, Turkey's Navy said in a maritime notice. The vessels had previously been scheduled to work until Oct. 22. NATO members Turkey and Greece are at odds over conflicting claims to hydrocarbon resources in the eastern Mediterranean and overlapping views on the extent of their continental shelves. Tensions flared in August when Ankara sent Oruc Reis to waters also claimed by Greece and Cyprus. Ankara had withdrawn Oruc Reis last month to "allow for diplomacy" before an EU summit at which Cyprus sought sanctions against Turkey, but sent it back this month, prompting an angry rebuke from Greece, France and Germany. Greece urged the EU to reconsider its customs union with Turkey in response to Ankara's exploration in the Mediterranean, deploring what it termed Turkey's "imperial fantasies." See also "[Will Cyprus Be Back in Turkey's Crosshairs Soon?](#)" ([Jerusalem Post](#))

Transparent Normalization

By Smadar Peri

- Here is a fact that may surprise the Israeli reader: only 9% of the residents of Saudi Arabia support signing normalization agreements with Israel. Three percent said that they “don’t know” and the rest, the vast majority, unequivocally said that they were opposed. Asked why, 60% said that the Palestinian side was more important than Israel, 30% said “you can’t trust Israel,” and 10% refused to explain their position. It’s important to understand: public opinion polls are very rare in Saudi Arabia. People refuse to take part so as not to anger or to speak against the regime. Most importantly: their opinion does not matter to the palace. That said, even the younger generation, whose representatives were invited to take part in the poll, said “no” to every question relating to future relations with Israel.
- The royal palace in Riyadh consists of two generations: the elderly king, Salman, who has insisted on clinging to the Saudi Arabia peace initiative from 2002 which states in the clearest language possible that the Israeli- Palestinian conflict must be resolved first and only then make a general Arab peace; and Saudi Crown Prince bin Salman, who prefers relations under the table with Israeli security experts and who gave his blessing to the kingdom of Bahrain to sign normalization agreements with Israel. Without his consent, that would not have happened. The crown prince isn’t troubled by the fact that the poll indicates to Israel and the US how difficult it is to sell that peace in Saudi Arabia. The picture is complex: the imam of Mecca’s Grand Mosque used his Friday sermon to reveal, for the first time, the good relations that he said had been forged in Saudi Arabia with Jews and Christians. A film on the Holocaust was scheduled to be screened for the first time at a Saudi film festival that was canceled at the last moment because of the coronavirus. The Saudi school system is currently working to revise the textbooks it uses: “monkeys” and “pigs” will no longer be synonyms for Jews. They are erasing and changing and intend to add the name of the State of Israel to the map of the Middle East.
- As long as King Salman remains functional in the palace, and as long as President Trump’s future in the White House remains unclear, no change in Saudi Arabia’s position can be expected. The crown prince, the ruler in practice, will be able to make changes immediately once the picture becomes clear. Saudi Arabia also sees eye- to-eye with Israel on the Iranian threat. Normalization agreements, or any open relationship with Israel, will help Saudi Arabia improve its problematic image in the US. There is a certain place in Saudi Arabia that is the apple of the crown prince’s eye: the developing desert city of Neom, which is close to the border with Egypt, Jordan and Eilat. Bin Salman’s palace has already held discrete talks with Israeli agriculture experts, engineers and high-tech experts. But it’s hard to know what is happening exactly in Neom now, and who is walking around there. This is a case of transparent normalization.

Nasrallah has a Score to Settle

By Alex Fishman

- According to Syrian sources, an Israeli aircraft dropped leaflets on the Syrian side of the Golan border with the following text: “The Syrian army’s First Corps and residents of the Golan! Anyone who either works with or collaborates with Hizbullah constitutes a target. They, the Lebanese, are sitting in Lebanon and placing you on the front line. Consider yourselves warned.” As chance would have it—or not—the report about those leaflets came on the same day as a different Syrian report—one that wasn’t confirmed by Israel—about Israeli anti-tank rocket fire on a Hizbullah target near Quneitra that caused injury to Hizbullah operatives and pro-Iranian militiamen. That rocket fire and what followed in its wake is another reminder that the Golan border is a boiling-hot border. The agreements that were reached between Israel and the Russians, which allowed for the return of the Syrian army to the Golan border to restore stability and order, have failed.
- The fighting on the [Syrian side of the] Golan Heights hasn’t ended. Between 40 and 60 militiamen—pro- Assad, anti-Assad, pro-Iranian, Hizbullah proxies and so on—are killed every day in Daraa, which is in the southern Golan Heights. There are dozens of armed groups that are fighting one another; every once in a while, that fighting spills over in the direction of the Israeli border. Israel and the Syrian regime and Iran are currently in the midst of a strategic competition to achieve influence over the Syrian side of the Golan Heights, a competition in which the Russians are a key player. Well before the IDF ended Operation Good Neighbor, which helped the residents of the Syrian Golan Heights, at the end of 2018, there were reports about Iranian agents who had infiltrated the area. Alongside the Iranians’ overt entrenchment in Syria, the Iranians and Hizbullah began to entrench themselves covertly on the Syrian side of the Golan border as well.
- Currently, two years after the IDF closed the hospital that served Syrian civilians and ended its humanitarian aid, there is no normal civilian life on the Syrian side of the Golan border. There are armed combatants who are fighting over territory and influence. Some of the attempted attacks on Israeli targets on the Golan border were committed by Syrian civilians who live in the area and who were recruited by the Iranians and Hizbullah in exchange for 30 dollars a month. Israel has been closely monitoring the persistent trickle of dozens of Hizbullah operatives who operate under the cover of and alongside the Syrian army’s First Corps, which returned to the area. The commander of the First Corps, Ali Ahmad Assad, has publicly visited Hizbullah positions on the Golan Heights, and Israeli observers have discerned what they describe as the Iranian-Syrian “double command” in some of the Syrian military units on the Golan: pro-Iranian units have been integrated into the Syrian army’s First Corps and have been given Syrian army uniforms to wear. Hizbullah operatives have been operating in proximity to and in coordination with those units. More than a year ago, Israel identified observation posts that were used jointly by the Syrian army and Hizbullah and attacked them. Israel also knows that the Iranians have an intelligence base on the Golan.

- **The IDF set up a war room, one of the more advanced war rooms that it has established in every arena along the border, which allows for multi-dimensional tracking by means of a broad range of sensors, radars and cameras that provide a continuous flow of information about the turn of events along the border and deeper inside Syrian territory. Israel and the Russians have the following shared interest: to scale back Iranian influence over the Syrian army. There have been reports in the past several months about the efforts that the Russians have been making to curb the infiltration into the ranks of Syrian army's First Corps' by Iranian and Hizbullah operatives, mainly in the Seventh Division. The Iranian effort to establish what is known as the "Golan file"—which is tasked with establishing small units to carry out terror attacks along the Israeli border and to establish Hizbullah's so-called "Southern Command," which is responsible for laying the infrastructure for a second front in the event of a war between Israel and Hizbullah in Lebanon—has been particularly salient in that division.**
- **The embedding of Hizbullah operatives and pro-Iranian militiamen among the civilians on the Golan and among the Syrian army troops has made it harder for Israel to locate and neutralize them. As opposed to its policy along the Lebanese border, Israel has not restricted its use of force in Syria. That is the reason that Nasrallah has insisted on exacting a price for every Hizbullah operative who is killed by Israel in Syria. If the Syrian reports about Hizbullah casualties as a result of an Israeli attack are correct, we are likely to hear Nasrallah speak up about that. He has had a score to settle since July, when a Hizbullah operative was killed in Damascus.**