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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

October 23, 2020

Times of Israel

Israel, Sudan to Reach Final Agreement to Normalize Ties

Israel and Sudan will announce the establishment of diplomatic ties over the weekend or early next week in a US-brokered deal, Hebrew media reported, citing officials involved in the negotiations. The [announcement](#) will likely come after a phone call between President Trump, Sudan's transitional leader Lt. Gen. al-Burhan, Sudan's Prime Minister Hamdok and Prime Minister Netanyahu. The breakthrough comes after a high-level Israeli-US delegation traveled to Sudan for covert negotiations on the normalization of ties between Khartoum and Jerusalem. Israeli officials have long expressed a wish for better relations with Khartoum. But Sudanese officials had been rejecting the US effort to tie Khartoum's removal from the blacklist to its normalizing ties with Israel. [See also "Palestinians: 'Big Disaster' If We Lose Sudan" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Reuters

Sudan Premier Ready for Israel Ties If Parliament Approves

PM Abdalla Hamdok is ready to proceed with normalizing relations with Israel once a yet-to-be-formed transitional parliament has approved the step, according to 2 Sudanese sources. The comments are the clearest sign that Hamdok is willing to contemplate establishing ties. Such a move would not be imminent, because the parliament still needs to be established under a power-sharing deal between the military officers and civilians who have been running Sudan jointly since the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir. It is unclear when the assembly will be formed. Khartoum's caution reflects concerns that such a major foreign policy move at a time of deep economic crisis could upset the delicate balance between military and civilian factions, and even put the government at risk, senior Sudanese gov't sources said. [See also "Haim Saban: MBS Said Iran, His People Would Kill Him If Saudi Arabia Normalized Ties with Israel \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Ynet News

Israel, US Sign Declaration Reaffirming Military Edge

Defense Minister Benny Gantz met Secretary of Defense Mark Esper at the Pentagon where they signed a joint declaration confirming Washington's strategic commitment to maintaining Israel's qualitative military edge. Gantz's visit mainly revolved around advancing Israel's bid to purchase advanced US-made aircrafts such as F-15 and F-35 fighter jets, transport helicopters, and a V-22 helicopter. For this purpose, cabinet ministers will convene this Sunday to approve a part of the procurement, which is expected to be funded by U.S. aid funds. However, the Ministry of Finance is expected to oppose the motion and promote a different outline formulated by the defense establishment. Israel's demands intensified after reports claimed the U.S. and UAE are expected to sign an arms deal on the sale of F-35 fighter jets by December, with silent agreement from Israel.

Compromise Reached on Top Jobs at Zionist Institutions

A crisis that threatened to drive a deep wedge between Israel and the Diaspora Jewish communities was averted, after a compromise was reached allowing the non-Orthodox movements and center-left parties to retain some influence in the key Zionist institutions. This agreement over the allocation of senior positions in the World Zionist Organization and its affiliate organizations – the Jewish Agency, United Israel Appeal and the Jewish National Fund – was reached after three intensive days of negotiations among the various delegations to the World Zionist Congress, which met this week. A preliminary agreement drafted by the right-wing and rigidly Orthodox parties that hold a slight majority in the current congress, sought to deprive the non-Orthodox movements and center-left parties of almost all positions of power in the Zionist institutions. [See also “Thousands Demonstrate Against Gov’t in Tel Aviv, Haifa” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Times of Israel

2 Rockets Fired from Gaza at Ashkelon, 1 Intercepted

Two rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip at the city of Ashkelon and nearby communities north of the Gaza Strip, the military said, the second attack in days following months of relative quiet along the border. The IDF said one projectile was intercepted by the Iron Dome air defense system. The second projectile appeared to land in an open field. No injuries or damage were reported. The attack triggered sirens throughout Ashkelon and in several communities south of the city. Video footage apparently showed the interception by the Iron Dome missile defense system over Ashkelon. The attack came two days after a single rocket was fired at Israel, drawing a reprisal raid. A Gazan rocket was also fired at Israel on Friday. Reports have proliferated in Hebrew media in recent weeks that Qatar is close to reaching a deal to resume supplying tens of millions of dollars in monthly cash transfers to Gaza, meant to help keep a lid on internal pressures. [See also “Palestinian Lawyers File Lawsuit Against Britain for 1917 Balfour Declaration” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Hamas Has Secret Cyber Headquarters in Turkey

Hamas has a secret cyberwarfare and counter-intelligence headquarters in Turkey directed by military leadership in Gaza, according to [the Times](#). The headquarters deals primarily with funding and coordination and was set up 2 years ago in Istanbul. Turkish President Erdoğan is unaware of the headquarters' existence, nor of Hamas operatives. According to the report, the headquarters is directed by Samakh Saraj, a senior Hamas member based in Gaza who reports directly to Yahya Sinwar, Hamas's leader in the Gaza Strip. The secret headquarters are also reportedly responsible for the purchasing of equipment that can be used for the manufacture of weapons, and coordinating cyber-operations against Hamas' enemies, including the Palestinian Authority in Gaza, and embassies of countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It also oversees surveillance and interrogation - in some cases of those within Hamas' own ranks suspected of disloyalty according to the report.

Turkey Blasts Greece, Cyprus, Egypt Over Accusations

Turkey has denounced a joint statement issued by Greece, Cyprus and Egypt in which the trio slammed Ankara for conducting “illegal” activities in the contested Mediterranean waters that threatened peace and stability in the region. The Foreign Ministry said in a statement that it rejected the “baseless accusations and claims against Turkey,” adding that such allegations were typical of the trio. Turkey says it has maritime rights to areas in the eastern Mediterranean Sea that are home to potential offshore gas reserves and where Cyprus, Greece and Egypt also claim jurisdiction. The simmering territorial dispute escalated earlier this summer after Ankara deployed its Oruc Reis research vessel to conduct exploratory work near the Greek island of Kastellorizo. Athens called on the EU to consider suspending its customs accord with Ankara, accusing the country of repeatedly violating the agreement. EU leaders have warned sanctions are on the table if Turkey’s “provocations” in the Mediterranean persist. [See also “Can Russia Benefit from Turkey-Greece Spat?” \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

President Aoun Taps Al-Hariri as PM to Form New Gov't

Lebanon's President Michel Aoun nominated former Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri to form a new government. After winning the backing of the majority of lawmakers during presidential consultations, Hariri has now to form the next cabinet. He was not backed by the Hezbollah terrorist group, which said it would not nominate anybody, although the Shi'ite Amal movement came out in his support. The Lebanese Forces, one of Lebanon’s key Christian parties and Hezbollah's rival, did not back him either. The nomination also comes almost a year since Hariri himself resigned, facing a tidal wave of protests against government corruption and inefficiency. While Lebanon's political system is designed to give some leverage to each of its religious factions, with Maronite Christians holding the presidency, Sunnis holding the PPM office and Shi'ites in control of the parliament speaker position, the protests that rocked Lebanon last fall were largely cross-sectarian, despite isolated clashes.

The Gulf Tunnel

By Alon Ben David

- **This week we found out that underneath the surface Hamas is still preparing for war with Israel, but above ground, and just as covertly, the efforts to formalize relations between Israel and Qatar have been developing. Without downplaying the ties that are forming with Sudan, a breakthrough with Qatar would herald a substantial change in the regional balance of power, as well as a chance for a stable truce arrangement in Gaza. Of course, it's all subject to the outcome of the election in the United States. The reports about the discovery of the tunnel in Gaza this week focused primarily on the success of the subterranean barrier, but this was actually a success by the entire system. Behind the barrier is an intelligence and scientific system, which proved this week that it knows how to break down all the signals that it picks up and translate them into a clear conclusion that indicates the presence of a tunnel with a very high degree of accuracy. The drill hit the tunnel, which is only 70 centimeters wide, right on the second try, and this was before all the technology that's supposed to be part of the barrier has been installed.**
- **This tunnel was clearly dug to challenge the new barrier and as part of Hamas's preparations for a future clash. Its depth is unusual (dozens of meters), and Hamas may have been trying to go under the barrier. It is about 1.5 kilometers in length and is connected to Hamas's defensive tunnel system inside Khan Yunis. This tunnel was dug over the course of many months, and over one million dollars and hundreds of hours of work were invested in it. In about a month the entire subterranean barrier will be complete, and then we'll be able to say that the threat of tunnels from Gaza infiltrating Israeli territory has in all likelihood been lifted.**
- **The fact that Hamas has continued preparing for war with us should not come as a surprise—in our region, nobody stops arming and building their military capabilities. But the fact that Hamas members forlornly watched Israel take away a valuable asset of theirs and restrained themselves—that is a clear signal that Hamas still wants a truce arrangement, not confrontation. The pictures that the IDF is snapping inside the tunnel now will presumably be shown to the Egyptian and Qatari mediators along with an unequivocal Israeli demand: there will be no truce arrangement so long as [Hamas] keeps digging tunnels.**
- **Here is where Qatar comes into play. The Qataris—who, together with the Turks, are the patrons of all the region's offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood, including Hamas—have come a long way. The country that used to send money under the table directly to Hamas's military wing has been helping Gaza openly, above the table, for the past two years. Talks that were recently held with Qatar managed to ensure that stable Qatari aid for the Gaza Strip will continue until the end of the year and into next year. Efforts are now being made to persuade the Qataris to switch from giving the Gazans fish to teaching them to fish, to convert the pocket money that they've been distributing to tens of thousands of families in Gaza into projects that will help Gaza stand on its own two feet.**

- The Qataris are willing to go in that direction, and the side whose position is unclear is actually Israel, which has justifiably conditioned any progress vis-à-vis Gaza on returning the captives and missing Israelis. A deal with Hamas about the captives will have a price—Hamas won't get everything it desires, but Israel won't get a deal without paying either. Hamas's leadership knows that, and the Israeli leadership has not yet decided whether it's currently willing to pay a price to bring back two fallen IDF soldiers and the two civilians in Gaza. The key to institutionalizing the ties with Hamas lie in the abilities of the United States and Israel to reconcile Qatar with its neighbors in the Persian Gulf.
- The visceral hatred between Qatar and Egypt will be hard to mediate, but the optimistic statements made by the American treasury secretary, who visited Qatar this week, are a sign that it will be possible to reconnect Qatar with the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The tiny but affluent kingdom of Qatar has always aspired to have regional influence. Twenty-four years ago, it founded the television network Al Jazeera, which became the most influential network in the region and one of the factors that accelerated the Arab Spring. Qatar has not balked at blatantly interfering in other countries' internal affairs either, whether by openly aiding the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or by supporting the rebels in Libya and Syria.
- However, the little gas kingdom has always made sure to stay on the fence: being a close ally of China, maintaining good relations with Iran, while at the same time hosting a huge US Air Force base on its territory. In the 1990s, it had public trade ties with Israel, and Al Jazeera was one of the first in the Arab world to give a platform to Israeli spokespersons, notwithstanding the clear anti-Israel line in its broadcasts. Now, having been boycotted by its neighbors for six years, it wants to rejoin the Sunni world and believes that Israel can pave the way for it. In the next few days Israel will celebrate at formalizing its relationship with the new African bride, Sudan, which looks as if it has been coerced into stepping under the huppah with Israel. But after the Sudanese, [forming relations with] Qatar appears to be Israel's next breakthrough in the region, and should that come to pass, it will be nothing less than a radical shift.

Truth or Dare

By Nahum Barnea

- This week I visited the Alon Headquarters, the unit set up by the Home Front Command to cope with the chains of infection. I returned from there with good news and bad news. The bad news is that the Israelis blatantly deceive their investigators, deceive them on a scale that threatens to render the epidemiological investigations meaningless. The good news is that the disease is less infectious than we have been led to believe. And there is another bit of good news, for those searching for an amusing angle in this bad story: It's lucky that the Israelis lie. If they were to tell the truth, millions would be in quarantine today. Brig. Gen. Nissan Davidi, commander of the Alon Headquarters, began his military career in the Artillery Corps. His latest post was director of the logistical division in the Technology and Logistics Directorate. He was about to take pre-retirement leave when the chief of staff proposed that he set up the new unit. "I don't regret it for a second," he said. "It's a huge challenge." Indeed, a challenge.
- The coronavirus crisis has posed most of the countries of the world with a difficult test. It is a particularly cruel test for democratic regimes. Israel is a case in point: its Health Ministry suffers from chronic weakness, and its leadership is riddled with holes like a sieve; its political echelon is preoccupied with politics and personal interests; the decisions it makes are tainted; the public is drowning in words: every evening, it hears explanations on what is happening from the prime minister, the health minister, the project manager, the [Health Ministry] director general, the director general's deputies, the professors, the physicians, the commentators, the reporters. Each one has their own version, their own opinion, their own numbers, their own agenda; there is no leadership; no consistency; no personal example; no horizon. The Israeli establishment has earned the loss of confidence honestly.
- The army tried to turn the chaotic reality into an orderly presentation. The project manager, Gamzu, and the director general, Hezi Levy, sit in the control center, and beneath them the Health Ministry apparatus and the desks—Haredi desk, Arab desk, general desk, education desk. Just a minute, what about management and planning, asked the army officials. Management and planning were handed over to the integration forum, as it is called. This forum is headed by the associate director general, Itamar Grotto. For all intents and purposes, he is the real project manager—he is supposed to decide on priorities and policy. According to a radio report, Grotto was asked this week why they aren't opening the bed and breakfasts. No problem, he replied. I am willing to open the bed and breakfasts, but let me close something else in return. The education system, for example. How wise of him. That is how one decides on priorities; that is how one sets policy; that is how one inspires confidence in the public, certainty, calm, that is how to close the Turkish bazaar that arises in Israel after every decision: Why are things opened for them and not for me; why are [the guidelines] enforced for me but not for them.

- **The IDF and the police are what we have; the Israeli government has no other forces that it can dispatch to the field. Perhaps that is for the better; governments should know their own limitations. And perhaps it is not for the better; there are hundreds of NGOs in Israel with hundreds of thousands of volunteers who could be deployed; there are presently hundreds of thousands of unemployed whom the government could have used. The army is the easy, immediate and temporary solution. We must not become addicted to it. Within two months, the army increased the number of investigators, making it four times as large—from 700 to 2,800 (next week). The images of female soldiers eliciting information from people over the phone are misleading; most of the investigators are civilians. One thousand of them are in local authorities. They speak the language of the patients, they know the people and the places. Over 1,000 nurses are active in investigations. About 700 female soldiers make up the shortfall.**
- **The IDF C4I Branch created, in cooperation with the 8200 unit, a smart investigation form, which is connected to the database of the Population and Immigration Authority. [...] Under the Health Ministry, it took a week to complete an investigative cycle. In the current system, it takes 30 hours. All that is fine and good, but the patients do not cooperate. They have plenty of reasons. First, they do not want to get their friends in trouble; second, they are worried about their privacy; third, a two-week quarantine is too severe a punishment; fourth, they have stopped being afraid and have stopped believing. Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee Chairman Zvi Hauser has been calling for months to shorten the quarantine period. There are countries in Europe that have done so. The Health Ministry refuses. Under pressure, it is now inclined to shorten the quarantine by two days. That is not enough, Hauser says. It should be shortened to ten days, perhaps even eight.**
- **The numbers are extreme: According to studies performed in Europe, by the time a patient is located they have come into contact with an average of 18 people. In the first wave, patients in Israel reported coming into contact with six people. Today they report having contact with three. Close to half the people sent to quarantine are not in quarantine. The GSS location tracking reveals that 90 percent of those who were identified [by the authorities] do not go into quarantine. Some say that they were identified mistakenly. Others simply disregard [the instructions]. With numbers like these, there is not much significance to the system created by the IDF. “Without the cooperation of the citizens and without enforcement it won’t work,” said Brig. Gen. Davidi.**
- **When Ronni Gamzu entered his post, a high-ranking police officer said, he spoke about a new contract between the citizen and the health authorities. The authorities would explain; the citizen would obey. Afterwards he came to the police and demanded: Enforcement, enforcement, enforcement. Not just him, everyone demands enforcement: The politicians who blatantly violated the guidelines demand enforcement, on condition that the case against them is closed; so too does the kashrut supervisor at the yeshiva in Bnei Brak, on condition that the enforcement is at the beach; so too does the demonstrator at Balfour Street, on condition that the enforcement is in Bnei Brak; and so does the public security minister, he first and foremost, on condition that the**

enforcement is at Balfour Street. Selective enforcement? Perhaps. What is certain is that the demand for enforcement is completely selective.

- The police allocated over 3,000 officers to cope with the coronavirus crisis. The police officers were dispersed throughout the districts; most of them operate at roadblocks, on the streets, in public spaces. Since the start of the crisis, a million and a half Israelis have been required to present an ID card to a police officer. The officer opened their tablet and looked for the person's name on the list of confirmed patients. Sometimes they issued a ticket; sometimes they made do with a warning. In total, 250,000 people were found to have committed an offense. The police are convinced that the presence of the officers is the factor that lowered the level of infection. In the absence of public trust, that is what's left. The police have maps that compare the level of infection to the number of tickets in geographical regions.
- I looked at several maps. The numbers are similar. Ostensibly, the number of tickets matches the number of patients. But statistics can be misleading. They do not take into account the discretion of the police officer on the ground, to which synagogue they issue a ticket and to which they do not, whom they pursue and whom they ignore. Incidentally, the Tel Aviv beach took a great many tickets, but no patients were counted there. "The purpose," said the high-ranking officer, "was not to enforce for the sake of enforcement, but rather to enforce in order to lower the morbidity. There were situations where we used our discretion. Yom Kippur, for example, or Memorial Day.
- "We said to everyone, from the prime minister downward: Enforcement is not the only tool. We have to mobilize the public through PR work. We have to turn compliance with the law into a moral issue: If you break [the law], you harm the elderly and the weak." Sometimes you made deals, I said. You act properly when the police officer is here. When the officer leaves, do what you want. "We are going for dialogue," he said. "The role of dialogue is to reduce friction. In principle we enforce. At spots where it requires to disperse a crowd, we employ discretion. The policy was correct. There were problems with the implementation; it's not easy to instill guidelines in police officers when they keep changing all the time."
- Some of the police officers are sent to check whether the people sent to quarantine are in quarantine. From time to time, officers come to the house, ask the person to come to the window and confirm. Army officials thought that this was a great waste of resources. If instead of a home visit the check is done by phone, including a photograph of the residence, it will be possible to reduce people's evasion of quarantine. Officials in the Alon Headquarters wanted to deploy soldiers. The chief of staff and the judge advocate general said no, soldiers will not enforce the law on civilians. Only police officers. Tension arose in this context between the Alon Headquarters and the police. The army believes in tracking software; the police has its own methods. On Wednesday, Public Security Minister Amir Ohana visited the headquarters. Yesterday, the acting police commissioner, Motti Cohen, went there. Give us police officers, the IDF requested. Promise us that a police car will be posted in every drive-through facility we open. Some people are unruly. We're not allowed to touch them. You're permitted.

- Daniel Lotem is a demonstrator at Balfour who was arrested by the police in August. He sent a long text to my colleague Oded Shalom, describing the police's conduct from his point of view. "The Israel Police has chosen a side and is being backed by the regime," he wrote. "It's very easy for them to exercise tolerance towards Bibi-ist demonstrators, and on the other hand, my friends and I got beat up...I as a citizen go out to protest and find myself assaulted by police who hit me vigorously in the van while I'm in handcuffs. The police at Moria Station were hostile and spoke in a politicized, borderline threatening way. At best, the police don't understand what their job in a democracy is; at worst, they don't know." I read the letter to the senior police officer. "I don't ever look at what's written on a demonstrator's sign," he said. "In terms of the demonstration's content, all I care about is keeping the camps from mixing. "I'll tell you how this looks from a lone officer's standpoint. The police officer doesn't want to get into a situation that has to be dispersed.
- Dispersing a demonstration is always violent. A lot of transpires between [the transition from] a quiet protest with a guy standing around holding a sign to a forcible confrontation. The TV reporters broadcast: soon it'll be forcibly dispersed, and they heat up the mood; there are processions; in one of the first demonstrations they blocked the light rail tracks. When the demonstration adversely affects others, we have to take action. It's our job. There's nothing political about it. "We aren't a political police. We're professionals. We know how to separate the political echelon from the operational considerations. Motti Cohen is above politics, he's not political. The country is in the middle of a deep crisis. It's a political, economic, health and legal crisis. It's hard to square checks and balances with the demands posed by the pandemic. We're in the middle, in the heart of the commotion. "There always has been political pressure, and there always will be. But saying that the police has been politicized or is following a minister's dictates is dangerous. That's liable to drag us into general disregard for the law, into anarchy."