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Israel and Middle East News Update

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November 16, 2020

Jerusalem Post

Knesset to Vote on Anti-Bibi Bill

The Knesset will vote on a bill that would prevent anyone under [criminal indictment](#) from serving as prime minister, [the opposition](#) announced. The bill is intended to harm Netanyahu, who is facing charges of fraud, breach of trust, and to test whether Blue & White would vote for it. KAN reported that preparations in Blue & White are underway for what the party will do once it leaves the coalition. The report said the party would focus on “ideological legislation” in its platform, such as legalizing gay couples adopting children from surrogate mothers, and not personal legislation against Netanyahu. A source close to Blue & White leader Benny Gantz declined to respond when asked if he had extended his deadline that he set three weeks ago for deciding whether to leave the coalition for this week. [See also “Employment Service warns of ‘chronic unemployment’ as layoff rate surges” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ynet News

IDF Strikes Hamas in Gaza After Rocket Fire on Israel

The IDF attacked [Hamas](#) targets in [Gaza](#), hours after rockets were fired at southern and central Israel from the Strip. The IDF Spokesperson's Unit said the Hamas targets included underground infrastructure and military positions. The Iron Dome missile defense system intercepted rocket fire targeting the southern city of Ashdod and central Israel, with eyewitnesses reporting loud explosions not far from Tel Aviv. The IDF has been on high alert on the first anniversary of the killing of Islamic Jihad military commander Baha Abu al-Ata in Gaza City. The IDF killed Abu al-Ata in an airstrike on November 12, 2019, initiating a military campaign in the Hamas-controlled enclave, which the IDF labeled "Operation Black Belt." [See also “Perfect Storm: Israel, Hamas Again Conveniently Blame Rocket Fire on the Weather” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Times of Israel

Bahrain FM to Make First Visit to Israel for Three-Way Talks

Two Bahraini ministers will make the first official visit to Israel by ministers from the Gulf kingdom later this week to take part in a trilateral meeting in Jerusalem with Israeli and US officials, Walla reported. The meeting is expected to be attended by PM Netanyahu, Sec. of State [Pompeo](#), and Bahraini FM Abdullatif Al- Zayani. FM Gabi Ashkenazi will also take part, as will Bahrain's Minister of Industry, Commerce and Tourism Zayed Al Zayani. The trip marks the first official visit by Bahraini ministers to Israel. Israeli officials quoted by Walla said they are working to finalize an aviation agreement for direct flights between Tel Aviv and Manama by Wednesday so it can be signed at the meeting. The officials are also expected to discuss opening embassies and exchanging ambassadors. [See also “Pakistan PM Says No Recognition of Israel Until Agreement with Palestinians” \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Israel Promotes Settlement Plan for Sensitive E. Jerusalem

Israel moved ahead with a settler housing plan in a sensitive area near East Jerusalem. The Israel Land Authority (ILA) invited contractor bids for building 1,257 homes in Givat Hamatos, under a plan revived in February by Netanyahu after it had been effectively frozen by international opposition. Bidding ends on Jan. 18, the ILA said, two days before Biden is to be sworn in. A spokesman for Palestinian President Abbas, said in a [statement](#) that settlements were illegal under international law and the tender was part of Israeli efforts “to kill the internationally-backed two-state solution”. Opponents of the project say it would sever parts of East Jerusalem from the nearby Palestinian town of Bethlehem in the West Bank, an issue EU foreign policy chief raised, saying he was “deeply worried” by the tender. [See also “Palestinians Torn as Israel Pitches Jerusalem as Destination to Gulf Tourists” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Times of Israel

Al-Qaeda No. 2 Was Planning Attacks When Killed in Tehran

The Al-Qaeda No. 2 reportedly shot dead by Israeli agents in Tehran was planning attacks on Israeli and Jewish Diaspora targets when he was killed, Channel 12 reported. [The New York Times](#) reported that Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah, aka Abu Muhammad al-Masri, was killed by Israeli agents at the behest of the US on August 7. Iran [denied](#) the Times story, claiming it was “made up information.” “Abu Muhammad al-Masri had recently begun planning attacks against Israelis and Jewish targets in the world,” the Israeli TV report said, quoting unnamed Western intelligence sources. This further underlined why the US and Israel had a “shared interest” in the elimination of this “arch-terrorist,” it said. The US was seeking him for orchestrating two devastating attacks on embassies in Africa in the 1990s, while Israel alleges he oversaw the 2002 suicide bombing of an Israeli-owned hotel in Kenya in which three Israelis were killed. [See also “Timing of Report on 'Israeli Hit' Could Aid Biden-Israel Relations” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Al-Monitor

US to Activate Air Defense Batteries to Test Iron Dome

The US Army has announced it is activating two air defense batteries at Fort Bliss, Texas, in preparations to test the Israeli Iron Dome system. The preparations to test the Iron Dome include converting an existing Terminal High Altitude Area Defense battery. “These actions are part of the Army’s force realignment initiative,” the Army said in the statement. The United States retrieved the first Iron Dome battery from Israel in October, and the pair of batteries are set to arrive at Fort Bliss by January. The Army said in May it plans to test the Iron Dome at White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico next year. “These Iron Dome batteries will provide the Army with an interim cruise missile defense capability,” the statement read. Congress mandated that the Iron Dome batteries be purchased to fill a gap in the US military’s air defense capabilities, despite public expressions of doubt from senior military officials over whether the system could reliably shoot down cruise missiles and be integrated into US electronic command-and-control systems. [See also “Top Pentagon Adviser Says ‘Israeli Lobby’ Funds Officials Who Want War” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Erdogan Calls for 'Two-State Solution' to Cyprus Division

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited breakaway Northern Cyprus, saying that he favored a permanent division of the disputed island into two states. Erdogan made the trip to lend his support to newly elected Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) President Ersin Tatar - who was also previously prime minister. He won a tight vote last month "that could further strain ties with the internationally-recognized Cypriot government to the south," Reuters reported. His opponent, Mustafa Akinci, backs reunification. Erdogan's comments marked a further setback for hopes of any eventual reunification of the island, split as it is between EU member the Republic of Cyprus, which controls two-thirds of the landmass and the north, which Turkey has occupied since 1974. "There are two peoples and two separate states in Cyprus," said Erdogan. "There must be talks for a solution on the basis of two separate states." The Turkish president's visit comes amid increased tensions on a number of fronts with Cyprus and its eastern Mediterranean neighbors as well as with the EU and individual states within it. [See also "Intel: US Blames 'Scheduling Issue' for No Pompeo-Erdogan Meeting" \(AI-Monitor\)](#)

Reuters

Lebanese Security Chief Visited Syria to Free US Captive

Lebanese Security Chief Abbas Ibrahim visited Damascus after a trip to Washington as part of efforts to free US citizen Austin Tice, who is thought to be held in Syria, Lebanese broadcaster Al-Jadid reported. Ibrahim told Al-Jadid he went on a two-day visit to Damascus and was in regular contact with Tice's mother to tell her that he would continue to work on her son's "file". President Trump has adopted the case of the freelance journalist and former US Marine officer who disappeared while reporting in Syria in 2012. Abbas said the trip to Damascus came after he visited Washington last month where he met with national security adviser Robert O'Brien. A Trump administration official on Oct.18 confirmed a newspaper report that a White House official travelled to Damascus earlier this year for secret meetings with the Syrian government seeking the release of Tice and another US citizen. The trip was the first time such a high-level US official had met in Syria with the isolated government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in more than a decade. Syria erupted into civil war nearly a decade ago after Assad in 2011 began a brutal crackdown on protesters calling for an end to his family's rule. [See also "Syria's Foreign Minister Walid Al-Moalem Dies at Age 79" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

A Love Story

By Nahum Barnea

- **Love is a complicated affair. It's easy to say, but hard to explain. Wikipedia, the bible of our generation, divides it into nine categories (parental, familiar, friendly, romantic, self-love, love of God, love for animals, for human beings and for a vocation), and then divides it into subcategories that pertain to passion, commitment, intimacy and, in a different division, on the basis of the enthusiasm, possessiveness and rational calculation. I turned to Wikipedia after I drove past one of the huge billboards along the Ayalon Highway. "Our beloved," read the white-lettered caption against a blue backdrop. The picture of our prime minister, several stories high, made the object of that love clear. The advertisements failed to clarify who the subjects are that are doing the loving. That information has remained classified.**
- **I hope the readers will forgive me for nitpicking, but "our beloved" is not an expression that was born here, between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Those are words that Russians or Ukrainians say, words that are taken from Semion Grafman's playbook, the man who introduced the term "seven shekels" into our national conversation [Semion Grafman is an activist-turned-celebrity or celebrity-turned-activist who was parodied on Eretz Nehederet with his Russian-accented refrain about everything costing 'seven shekels'—INT]. In his monologues, Semion frequently waxes poetic about "our beloved country." No more. When the time comes for a personality cult, the leader comes before the country. He is loved as an emotion; the country is loved by edict. Just like the sober refrain that was once popular in democratic Israel: "Russia is our mother; Stalin is our father. If only we could be orphans."**
- **It is very important for professional politicians to be loved. Even mean, cynical, cold and brutal politicians melt whenever they read a complimentary line about themselves in the newspaper, or when they receive a warm email from a groupie who lives halfway around the world. "The people love the president," was the headline of a text message that I received yesterday from President Trump's campaign team. If we didn't win enough ballots at the polling stations, we'll take solace in the people's love. That doesn't need to be tallied. Ephraim Katzir, Israel's fourth president, came under a fair amount of criticism during his term in office. One day he visited a school. The children danced in a circle around him. Look at how much they love you; he was told. What are you complaining about? "They love me up to the fourth grade," lamented Katzir.**
- **I'll admit I've never thought about Netanyahu in terms of love until now. I valued his intelligence, his talents, his learning curve. I valued his political skills, his acting skills, his fighting spirit. I less valued his personality traits, his attitude towards his colleagues, his attitude towards the truth. I always thought that beneath the impressive veneer lurked a weak, frightened man who was overly preoccupied with himself. "He's a machine," said one person who knew him from up close. He works like a machine, is efficient like a machine, needs to be perpetually greased like a machine, is inhuman and immoral like a machine. I can understand people who admire him; I can understand people who believe**

that he is advancing their agenda and that, as a consequence, they support him. The support that he receives from settler circles is logical; the support that he receives from the Haredi street is logical. He isn't the ideological, consistent, trustable, clean-handed leader that many of them would like to have, but he gets the job done for them.

- But love? Not a single one of the nine types of love cited by Wikipedia is conducive to love for Netanyahu. Not love for family or a friend and not romantic love either. Love of God maybe, but Netanyahu is no god. The personality cult that has grown up around him has not yet reached North Korean dimensions. There are some leaders who win the public's love, or at least part of the public's love because of the warmth they radiate. Their heart is on public display. Joe Biden is that kind of leader, and so is Reuven Rivlin. People feel that they're part of their family. Do people feel that they're part of the Netanyahu family? Do people feel that the Netanyahu family is interested in sharing its life with them? In sharing its swimming pool in Caesarea with them? The testimony given by employees in the Prime Minister's Residence over the years answers those questions with an unequivocal no.
- The same is true of his colleagues. When a newspaper runs a positive story about Israel's economic situation and accompanies that report with a photograph of the finance minister, Netanyahu copies the text to social media, but first he cuts out the finance minister's picture and pastes in a picture of himself. As grand as his title may be, that is how petty he is. That isn't the way our beloved ought to act. The secret about love, it seems to me, is far simpler: people love Netanyahu because other people hate him. Hate and love come from the same place, the same impulse. Tell me who hates Netanyahu and I'll tell you who loves him. Trump built himself by tapping into those impulses. So has Netanyahu.

The String-Pullers

By Ronen Bergman

- Based on information that was provided by intelligence sources in Washington to the [New York Times](#) (in an article that Ronen Bergman co-wrote), one can draw several interim conclusions with a high level of certainty about the United States' request and Israel's consent to carry out the assassination of Abu Muhammad al-Masri in August in the heart of Tehran.
- **First Conclusion:** The Iranians hold nothing sacred, or to put it in the terms that Khomeini used to justify accepting a cease-fire agreement with Saddam Hussein—they are prepared to drink poison and to make a deal with the devil. One would be hard put finding something more anathema and hateful to the Shiite revolutionary authorities in Iran than the Sunni jihadist movements. Nevertheless, the Iranians chose to host under luxurious conditions for many years (essentially throughout most of the time since al-Qaida's leadership became wanted [by the United States] after the [American] embassies were bombed) large parts of al-Qaida's leadership, the most lethal international terrorist organization in existence.
- The Iranians apparently did so for a combination of two reasons. The first was their desire to be able to coordinate and cooperate on operations against shared enemies, such as the United States or Israel. The second was their desire to keep senior al-Qaida members nearby in Iran so as to guarantee that al-Qaida would not commit terror attacks against Iran or target Iranian interests. In specific terms, the Iranians put up in a posh apartment in an upscale neighborhood al-Qaida's most senior operations man, one of the founding members of the organization, a member of its Shura Council, which is the highest command; he was a trusted friend of Osama bin Laden and married his daughter to bin Laden's son; and he had the blood of hundreds if not thousands of people on his hands.
- The Iranians knew that if news the death of al-Masri in the heart of Tehran were to get out, the very same al-Masri who is a high-ranking leader of the organization that they are fighting against and which they have sold to the Iranian citizenry as the very embodiment of all evil, their primary problem would not be outward—how do they explain to the world that they were hosting a murderous arch-terrorist; rather, their problem would be inward—how do they explain that to the Iranian public? What do they say to al-Masri's neighbors, who suddenly come to learn that the affable Shiite Lebanese historian who lived next door was actually the deputy commander of al-Qaida? The stormy reactions in Iran to the report yesterday only proved how right the authorities were to try to cover it up.
- **Second Conclusion:** The report in the New York Times shows just how deeply the Mossad in particular and Israeli intelligence more generally have infiltrated the ranks of Iran's intelligence, military and security services. This is the same in-depth infiltration that allowed the Mossad, according to foreign reports, to blow up the nuclear facility in

Natanz a few months ago, to strike precisely at the most sensitive and important component in the entire nuclear chain of production. This time it allowed Israel to learn that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and the Intelligence Ministry were secretly hosting al-Qaida's leadership (Seif al-Adel, the second deputy leader spends some of his time there). The ability to locate al-Masri and then to assassinate him reflects the Mossad's exceptional intelligence and operational capabilities, which were placed at the United States' disposal.

- **Third Conclusion:** Intelligence relations between Israel and the United States are closer than ever. Al-Qaida is not high on the list of the Israeli intelligence community's priorities and keeping al-Masri under a fake identity was designed to prevent him from being identified. Neither was the desire to take him out an Israeli desire, even though Israel also had an open score of its own with him. It was primarily the Americans who had had an open score with him for the past 22 years, a score that the United States had been unable to settle, and which top US administration officials asked Israel to settle for them, according to the report. They [the Mossad, presumably] spent an entire year tracking al-Masri, who took various precautions, changed apartments and cars, until an operational opportunity to kill him presented itself.
- As chance would have it, that opportunity came knocking on the 22nd anniversary of the terror attacks on the American embassies. There is nothing quite as sensitive as an assassination to make countries, even close friends, hesitant about cooperating. The request that was made by the American leadership to Israel to settle its score with al-Masri, as reported by the New York Times, is proof of how much trust and confidence Uncle Sam's spies have in working with the Mossad and the other members of the [Israeli] intelligence community. The fact that it was the Mossad that settled a score on behalf of the largest superpower in the universe is proof of its capabilities. Having said that, Israel would not have been able to carry out a large part of the operations that have been ascribed to it against Iran—in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran itself—without the large umbrella that the United States has kept open over its head.