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Israel and Middle East News Update

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Headlines:

- **Anti-Netanyahu Protesters Rally Across Israel**
- **Nearly Half of New Coronavirus Cases Among Israeli Arabs**
- **Palestinians Mull Cutting Payments to Some Terror Convicts**
- **Bahraini King Offers to Host Israel, Palestinians for Talks**
- **Pompeo Visits Israeli-Occupied West Bank and Golan**
- **Lebanon Sets Starting Point for Sea Border Negotiations**
- **Islamic State Claims Attack on Egypt's Gas Pipeline to Israel**
- **France Wants Intl Supervision in Nagorno-Karabakh**

Commentary:

- **Yedioth Ahronoth: "Damaged Confidence"**
 - By Alex Fishman
- **Ma'ariv: "Settling Scores"**
 - By Alon Ben David

News Excerpts

November 20, 2020

Times of Israel

Anti-Netanyahu Protesters Rally Across Israel

Protests against Prime Minister Netanyahu were held across Israel as part of ongoing demonstrations over his indictment on graft charges and handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Protesters carried large inflatable balloons in the shape of submarines, referring to a major corruption scandal involving the purchase of naval vessels that ensnared several close associates of Netanyahu, but not the prime minister himself. Demonstrators have been holding regular protests against Netanyahu, demanding he resign over his trial on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust. Netanyahu denies wrongdoing and claims the indictments are part of an effort by political rivals, the media, police and prosecutors to remove him from office. [See also “IMF Urges Israel Government to Promptly Pass 2021 Budget” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ynet News

Nearly Half of New Coronavirus Cases Among Israeli Arabs

Nearly half of the new coronavirus cases detected in the past week have come from the Arab sector, the National Security Council said, indicating a 6.5% positivity rate. Only 9.5% of cases were found in the ultra-Orthodox communities and 44.5% were found in the general population. Nazareth, the largest Arab city in Israel was classified as a red zone because of increased morbidity. The coronavirus cabinet is set to discuss imposing a lockdown on the city in order to curb the spread of the virus. Another Arab city, that is also located in the Galilee was locked down on Wednesday after a spike in cases that showed a 10.4% positivity rate of tests conducted there. Other Israeli Arab communities were also locked down due to the increased spread of the virus among residents. [See also “Meet Mansour Abbas, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Unlikely Ally” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Times of Israel

Palestinians Mull Cutting Payments to Some Terror Convicts

In an attempt to build new ties with the incoming administration of President-elect Joe Biden, the Palestinian Authority is considering changing its policy of paying stipends to Palestinian security prisoners, including those convicted of terror attacks. Israel has long sought to clamp down on the practice, which it says constitutes incitement to terrorism. Israeli officials have called it “pay-for-slay,” saying that it incentivizes terror by increasing payments depending on the sentence — meaning that those whom Israel has convicted of more serious crimes receive more money from the PA. But Ramallah has repeatedly defended the policy, describing the payments as a form of social welfare. It is also popular domestically: In addition to those who unabashedly support armed terror against Israeli civilians, many ordinary Palestinians do not trust Israel’s military justice system. [See also “Israeli, Palestinian Officials Meet in Ramallah After Resumption of Security Ties” \(I24 News\)](#)

Bahraini King Offers to Host Israel, Palestinians for Talks

Senior officials from Manama, Abu Dhabi, and Amman told Israel Hayom that the tripartite meeting focused mainly on consolidating a unified Arab front to contend with the Iranian threat to the region, as well as consolidating a future strategy for working with the incoming US administration. President-elect Joe Biden has made clear he intends to return to the 2015 Iran nuclear accord, a move that has raised concerns among Persian Gulf and moderate Sunni Arab states. A senior Bahraini official told Israel Hayom that during the meeting in Abu Dhabi, the possibility was raised that Bahrain would act to [renew negotiations](#) between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. As part of these efforts, the Bahraini king proposed hosting a meeting of Israeli and Palestinian officials in Manama in an attempt to kick-start the stalled peace process. [See also "Former US Ambassador: Normalization Agreement Could "Generate Momentum" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Pompeo Visits Israeli-Occupied West Bank and Golan

Mike Pompeo became the first US secretary of state to visit an Israeli West Bank settlement and the [Golan Heights](#), in a show of solidarity that led [Palestinians](#) to accuse him of helping to cement Israeli control over occupied territory. Pompeo travelled the short distance from Jerusalem to the Israeli-occupied West Bank - known to most Israelis as Judea and Samaria - where more than 440,000 Jewish settlers live uneasily among three million Palestinians, mostly in fortified hilltop settlements. He dined at Shaar Binyamin, an Israeli industrial zone just north of Jerusalem where [Psagot winery](#) - taking its name from a nearby settlement - has a blend named after him. Pompeo's visit departed from past policy that had kept top US officials away from settlements, which Palestinians view as obstacles to a viable future state. Palestinians in the area say that the Psagot winery was built in part on Palestinian land. Pompeo later flew to the Golan Heights. [See also "Are Pompeo's Israel Announcements Easy Come, Easy Go?" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Lebanon Sets Starting Point for Sea Border Negotiations

President Michel Aoun specified Lebanon's starting point for demarcating its sea border with Israel in the first public confirmation of a stance sources say actually increases the size of the disputed area. Israel and Lebanon launched the negotiations with delegations from the long-time foes convening at a UN base to try to agree on the unresolved border that has held up hydrocarbon exploration in the potentially gas-rich area. A Presidency statement said Aoun instructed the Lebanese team that the demarcation line should start from the land point of Ras Naqoura as defined under a 1923 agreement and extend seaward in a trajectory that a security source said extends the disputed area. Israel already pumps gas from huge offshore fields but Lebanon, which has yet to find commercial gas reserves in its own waters, is desperate for cash from foreign donors as it faces the worst economic crisis since its 1975-1990 civil war. [See also "Israel and the West Must Change Their Dated Outlook on Lebanon" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Islamic State Claims Attack on Egypt's Gas Pipeline to Israel

Egypt's military said a "limited explosion" struck a gas pipeline in North Sinai, an incident for which the Islamic State's local branch has claimed credit. The explosion took place near the town of el-Arish, in an area of the Sinai Peninsula that continues to face an Islamist insurgency, despite the Egyptian military's often brutal efforts in recent years to rout the fighters. A release by the group said its fighters had detonated improvised explosive devices along Egypt's natural gas pipeline to Israel, causing "great material damage" to the line. The extent of the damage was not immediately clear. Egypt previously exported natural gas to Israel via an underwater extension of the Arab Gas Pipeline. Sabotage attacks on the pipeline following Egypt's January Revolution in 2011 led the original deal to collapse. Egypt's General Intelligence Service may benefit from the new arrangement, which is helping reduce Egypt's debt to Israel. Still, the newer deal has raised some muted controversy given that Cairo has huge gas reserves itself. [See also "Cross Border Attack Tunnel Discovered Last Month Was Deepest Ever Found" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

France Wants Intl Supervision in Nagorno-Karabakh

France wants international supervision to implement a ceasefire in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict amid concerns in Paris that Russia and Turkey could strike a deal to cut out Western powers from future peace talks, the presidency said. Moscow co-chairs the Minsk group overseeing the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute with Washington and Paris, but they were not involved in the deal signed by Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan to end six weeks of fighting over the enclave. Since the ceasefire, Russia has held talks with Turkey, a key Azerbaijani ally and a harsh critic of the Minsk group, that could lead to Ankara deploying troops to the region. France's population includes between 400,000 to 600,000 people of Armenian origin. Macron has been careful not to back a side in the conflict but has faced criticism at home that he did not do enough to help Yerevan. The source said Paris was pushing for "international supervision" of the ceasefire to allow the return of refugees, organize the return of foreign fighters, especially from Syria, and to start talks on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. [See also "Is Russia's naval base in Sudan a signal to Turkey ... and Biden?" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Damaged Confidence

By Alex Fishman

- A majority of the Jewish-Israeli public 73% thinks that the IDF is prepared from an operational standpoint to cope with the main threats to Israel. But in the same breath, only 39% of this public think that the civilian home front in Israel is protected against a large-scale military offensive against the country. The first finding is not surprising: in all polls conducted in recent years, the IDF enjoys widespread confidence in the public, more than any other Israeli institution. However, it has become apparent that not only have 61% of the public understood that the home front will be part of the next war, but they also believe that defensive systems such as the Iron Dome system provide only a partial response to a missile attack, and that there are insufficient shelters in Israel. And so, although the public believes that the army is prepared for war—it also believes that the home front has been neglected.
- These findings arise from a poll conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI), ahead of the institute's annual conference on national security and democracy that is scheduled for next week. This is a unique poll, because this is the first time that IDI has conducted a poll focusing solely on the public's confidence in the IDF. The poll questioned 1,012 people, all Jewish adults aged 18 and above. The poll shows that political tendency also influences the attitude towards the IDF. It is true that a majority of the Jewish-Israeli public 72.5% has confidence in the professionalism of the senior command echelon in the IDF, but respondents who defined themselves as left-wing voters rely more 81.5% on the professionalism of the senior military echelon, versus 73% who defined themselves as center voters, and 72% among respondents who identified themselves as right wingers. Dr. Idit Shafran Gittleman, director of the IDI Military and Society program, said that the Israeli left wing relies more on the senior military echelon because it apparently regards it as a balancing factor in the decision-making process versus the current political echelon.
- The poll shows further that only 55% of respondents believe that the value system of the IDF senior command is close to the value system of the general public in Israel. 26% said there was no compatibility between the value system of the military top brass and the public. Dr. Gittleman sees this finding as a warning light for society: "A shared value system is an expression of the confidence that the general public has in the decisions of the IDF senior command." In another grave finding, 60% of the public think that the professional recommendations of the IDF senior command are not solely influenced by military and operational considerations—meaning [they are influenced] also by irrelevant considerations: political, economic and others. "The IDF must be careful to uphold truth and transparency," warned the director of the IDI, "otherwise the lack of confidence is liable to harm its ability to perform its primary mission." But there is a full consensus between right wing, left wing and center on one issue, according to the poll: A majority of the Israeli public 65% wants the IDF to manage the handling of the coronavirus crisis.

Settling Scores

By Alon Ben David

- The general staff's situation assessments always begin with a description of the region's influential factors. Over the past year the list of factors has been topped by "the elections in the United States." This week it was replaced by "the Biden administration." The entire region has been preparing for the change that US President-Elect Joe Biden will bring with him, but until then there are still two months left in Donald Trump's term, and events from the past few days signal that it's going to be a packed and intense two months. The impending change could already be seen last week: Abu Mazen, who turned 85 this week, was filled with flexibility and vigor and came down from the boycott-Israel tree that he had climbed six months ago. His stupid argument with Israel cost the Palestinian Authority the loss of governability, economic collapse and now the threat of a coronavirus outbreak.
- Some people thought that Trump would try to exploit the twilight between the administrations to launch a military assault on Iran. Senior Israeli officials heard that fear too from their colleagues in the Pentagon, but then US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley came and gave Trump an exemplary lesson in civics: we don't swear loyalty to a leader, a party or even the country, he said. We swear only to [defend and uphold] the Constitution. Milley reminded us that there are times when even those in uniform must make their voices loud and clear. A moment like that transpired here in Israel too, in Caesarea, and our chief of staff did well by not keeping silent in view of the incident.
- In the two months he has left, Trump will try to step up the pressure on Iran even further and establish facts on the ground: additional sanctions, diplomacy, and covert operations. It's unclear why Trump refrained from divulging the successful assassination of the senior al-Qaida operative in Tehran and capitalizing on it during the campaign. With that assassination, Israel settled American's score over the 224 deaths in the terror attacks that Abu Muhammad al-Masri committed, and Trump had every reason to take pride in that achievement. The operation also revealed the depth of the intimacy between the Israeli and US intelligence services.
- According to reports, Israel provided the Americans with its operational infrastructure and capability in Iran, as part of their bilateral cooperation. Many imagined Israeli warriors flying on motorcycles through the streets of Tehran, but in the age of modern technology, and all the more so ever since the coronavirus outbreak, it's difficult to impossible to send [undercover protagonist of the Israeli TV series Tehran] Tamar Rabinyan on a mission like that. Those kinds of missions are carried out by agents—foreigners whom Israel handles. Contrary to reports, the assassination of Mariam, the wife of bin Laden, was unintentional. The report also managed to embarrass Iran with the unclear timing of the exposure of this operation, pointing out the double game that the Shiite ayatollahs have been playing with the radical Sunnis of al-Qaida. [...] This week's

discovery of the explosives on the Golan Heights provided Israel with an opportunity to deliver another blow to the Iranians in Syria, this time openly.

- To be safe, Iron Dome batteries were deployed in the north, but the Iranians are unlikely to dare to retaliate so long as Trump is in office. This year, which began with the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, has been one of the hardest years for Iran. They have taken hits on almost every front. Under the table they have been trying to wage covert cyberwarfare against Israel, with attempted assaults on civilian infrastructure, particularly water, and recently on the electrical infrastructure. Israel's retaliation, according to media reports, against their port Bandar Abbas was clumsy at first, but lately the Iranians have been getting a firsthand experience of the cyber capabilities that have been attributed to Israel, and they're finding them unpleasant.
- That said, it bears remembering that Iran's cup of poison is filling up, and at some point, they will not be able to keep taking more blows without retaliating. For years Israel worriedly followed Iran's regional expansionism. Our officials were wont to say that "Israel doesn't have a border with Iran, but Iran has a border with Israel: in Syria, Lebanon and Gaza." Now things have changed, and it's the Iranians who watch with concern as Israel approaches them. To the, [Israel's] public ties with the Persian Gulf states look like a noose that is starting to tighten around them, and they're afraid that soon enough they'll see Israeli warplanes training in the Emirates.
- It must be presumed that at some point they will be compelled to respond. It will be several months before the Biden administration makes time to deal with the Middle East and Iran. Biden will need to spend the winter and the spring dealing with the economy and the coronavirus, and maybe next summer he'll be able to devote time to our region. Israel also intends to take advantage of the Biden years in order to secure continued US military aid in a new agreement that will take effect in 2029. For now, with Deni Avdija's pick by the Washington Wizards, we can be certain that we'll have an Israeli representative of stature in the US capital.