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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

April 12, 2021

Reuters

Israel Pledges to Work with US on Iran

Defense Minister Benny Gantz pledged to cooperate with the United States on [Iran](#), voicing hope that Israeli security would be safeguarded under any renewed Iranian nuclear deal that Washington reaches. “Israel views the United States as a full partner across all operational theatres, not the least Iran,” Gantz said after hosting visiting US Defense Secretary Lloyd [Austin](#). Austin’s visit includes talks with Prime Minister Benjamin [Netanyahu](#), who is worried about the Democratic administration’s desire for a return to the nuclear deal. Netanyahu has said Israel will not be bound by a renewed deal, which he describes as a temporary cap on Iranian nuclear capabilities that would pave the way to bomb-production in the longer-run. [Dig Deeper “Austin Fails To Mention Iran in Speech, While Gantz Vows To Cooperate On Nuclear Deal” \(Ynet News\)](#)

Associated Press

Iran Calls Natanz Atomic Site Blackout ‘Nuclear Terrorism’

Iran described a blackout at its underground Natanz atomic facility an act of “nuclear terrorism,” raising regional tensions as world powers and Tehran continue to negotiate over its tattered nuclear deal. While there was no immediate claim of responsibility, suspicion fell immediately on Israel, where its media nearly uniformly reported a devastating cyberattack orchestrated by the country caused the blackout. Details remained few about what happened at the facility, which initially was described as a blackout caused by the electrical grid feeding its above-ground workshops and underground enrichment halls. The IAEA, the United Nations’ body that monitors Tehran’s atomic program, earlier said it was aware of media reports about the incident at Natanz and had spoken with Iranian officials about it. [Dig Deeper “Nuclear Production at Natanz Set Back at Least 9 Months” \(I24 News\)](#)

Al-Monitor

Report Outlines How Iran Smuggles Arms to Hamas

Israeli military expert Amir Bohbot revealed in a report published by Walla News said that in 2006, Iran opened a route to smuggle missiles and ammunition to Hamas in the Gaza Strip through Yemen and Sudan. A source told Al-Monitor that other weapons are shipped through the Suez Canal and then surreptitiously delivered to Gaza frogmen. The delivery of weapons to Hamas in Gaza and the smuggling routes will continue to trigger controversy at the Israeli, regional and international levels. The combat equipment that Hamas possesses today — some of which came to light in the 2014 war and some of which was revealed in military parades and drills in the besieged enclave’s cities — appears to show how smuggling has helped Hamas develop advanced combat capabilities. [Dig Deeper “Israel to Close Border Crossings to Gaza, West Bank for Memorial, Independence Days” \(I24 News\)](#)

EU Funds Unapproved Palestinian School in Jordan Valley

The Palestinian Authority (PA) built an unapproved school in the Hamam al Maliakh hot springs, reported Regavim, a right-wing organization dedicated to preserving Israel's land and resources. The structure is located in the Jordan Valley's Bazak Nature Reserve, which falls under the Israeli jurisdiction of Area C and is in one of the seven West Bank nature reserves that Israel established last year. Although the PA has no jurisdiction in Area C, it has continued to request property registrations there. Most requests for building permits are not approved by Israel's Civil Administration. Likewise, the structure - funded by the European Union - had not received legal approval by the Israeli government. In January 2020, another illegal school was discovered in Area C and was destroyed by the Civil Authority. [Dig Deeper "Witnesses Back Woman Against IDF Claim Husband Shot Dead To Prevent Car-Ramming"](#) (Times of Israel)

Fatah Fails in Bid to Block Rival Candidates

Attempts by PA President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah faction to block political rivals from running in the May 22 parliamentary elections suffered a major blow when the Palestinian Central Elections Commission rejected its appeals against the nomination of dozens of candidates. Fatah representatives last week submitted objections to candidates whose names appeared on electoral lists belonging to Hamas, exiled Fatah leader Mohammad Dahlan and Nasser al-Kidwa, a former PA foreign minister who formed an alliance with jailed Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti. The commission said it had rejected 226 out of 231 objections submitted by Fatah and other parties against lists and candidates nominated for the parliamentary elections. Fatah also appealed against the nomination of some Hamas candidates on the grounds that they had failed to submit their resignations from NGOs and other institutions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This appeal was rejected by the Central Elections Commission.

Egypt Freezes Talks To Normalize Ties with Turkey

Egypt has temporarily suspended talks on the normalization of ties with Turkey, according to a report in the Saudi-owned and Dubai-based Al Arabiya news channel. One of the reasons for the move is Turkey's failure to quickly answer Cairo's demand it immediately act to remove Turkish mercenaries from Egypt's conflict-ridden neighbor to the west, Libya, among other things. In an attempt to ease tensions, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu spoke with his Egyptian counterpart Sameh Shoukry to wish him a happy Ramadan ahead of the monthlong holiday. The situation is a complex one for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Around one month ago, his government began to restrict Muslim Brotherhood activity in Turkey, ordering Istanbul-based TV channels affiliated with the Islamist group to immediately stop their criticism of Egypt. While Turkey has committed to implementing additional steps by the end of Ramadan to placate Egypt, Cairo has demanded immediate action on this front. [Dig Deeper "Egypt, Sudan Reject Ethiopian Proposal for Data Sharing On Renaissance Dam"](#) (Reuters)

Reuters

US To Send Two Warships to Black Sea

The US will send two warships to the Black Sea next week, Turkey said as Russia, which has boosted its military forces near Ukraine, accused NATO powers that do not have a coast line in the region of increasing naval activity. The Pentagon declined to discuss Turkey's comments but said the military routinely sends ships to the region. Washington says Russia has amassed more troops on Ukraine's eastern border than at any time since 2014, when it annexed Crimea from Ukraine and backed pro-Russian separatists in the eastern Donbass region of Ukraine. Violence has flared between Ukrainian troops and the separatists. Russian President Vladimir Putin, during a telephone conversation with Turkey's President Tayyip Erdogan, accused Ukraine of "dangerous provocative actions" in the Donbass region. US warships are regularly in the Black Sea, including a cruiser and destroyer being there late last month. The 1936 Montreux accord gives Turkey control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, which connect the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. It also limits access of naval warships and governs foreign cargo ships.

Associated Press

Jordanian Prince Makes First Public Appearance

Jordan's Prince Hamzah made his first public appearance since he was placed under house arrest last week, reciting Quranic verses together with King Abdullah II at the graves of their forefathers. The gesture appeared to be an attempted show of unity on a major Jordanian holiday. Abdullah has attempted to signal in recent days that the situation is under control. But the staged event left it unclear whether the king and his popular half-brother have truly put aside their differences. The conflict had escalated into the most serious public rift in the ruling family in decades, although Hamzah has denied any wrongdoing. Hamzah joined members of the Jordanian royal family marking the centenary of the establishment of the Emirate of Transjordan, a British protectorate that preceded the kingdom. The royal palace released a photo and video with Abdullah and Hamzah joining other dignitaries at the grave of their father, the late King Hussein, and the late King Talal, their grandfather. A photo and video showing the family together reciting the opening chapter of the Quran appeared to be aimed at sending a message of unity at a sensitive time for the kingdom.

Dangerous Gamble

By Itamar Eichner

- **Tehran marked Iranian National Nuclear Technology Day last weekend. To mark the occasion, Hassan Rouhani ordered the operation of the advanced centrifuges in the uranium enrichment facility in Natanz. The Iranians never imagined that at precisely that moment they would receive a special “gift” for the occasion: an operation that stopped their ability to operate the centrifuges, probably shutting down the facility for a significant length of time. Western intelligence sources say that the Mossad was behind the operation. Formally, Israel did not assume responsibility, but it was impossible to ignore yesterday the pictures of Prime Minister Netanyahu raising Independence Day toasts at the headquarters of the Mossad, the GSS and the IDF. The impression is that Israel is doing everything it can to sabotage the talks between the European-mediated talks between the US and Iran to revive the nuclear agreement and to lift the sanctions on Tehran.**
- **The “malfunction” in Natanz came at a particularly sensitive time, during Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin’s visit to Israel. This was the first visit by a high-ranking member of the Biden administration to Israel. It was for good reason that Biden sent his secretary of defense and not the secretary of state: the US wants to ensure that the return to the nuclear agreement is not damaging to Israel’s security. Washington will provide solutions for Israel’s security if the need arises as a result of lifting the sanctions and returning to the agreement. But Austin’s visit contains another message: the US wants to guarantee that Israel does not intend to sabotage its efforts to return to the diplomatic track with Iran in Vienna. Some view Austin’s visit at the current juncture in time as an American attempt to rein in Israel. Israel is taking a dangerous gamble: any future operations that it takes against Iran are liable to set fire to the region without American support. Up until now, Israel and Iran sparred with relatively low intensity.**
- **The Iranians have wanted to find a way to avenge the assassination of its nuclear scientist, Fakhrizadeh, but they have been walking on eggshells. It seems that they do not want an all-out escalation in hostilities. This approach was evident in the attempted terrorist attack near the Israeli embassy in New Delhi and the Iranian attacks on Israeli-owned ships—attacks that were not meant to sink them but only to damage them slightly. One problem is that all of Israel’s talk and boasting after its successful operations—according to foreign reports—may come at a high price later. The operation in Natanz, if it is attributed to Israel, may also prompt second thoughts among White House officials about how to relate to it.**

“The Cost of Bravado”

By Ben Caspit

- There isn't a security cabinet [i.e. it has not been convened], there isn't a Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee or any other meaningful security forum that either discusses or makes decisions, and there isn't any trust between the prime minister and the defense minister. What is there? There are leaks; there is bravado; there are operational successes (if the malfunction at Natanz is the result of an Israeli operation). But there is also risk-taking, raising the threshold and running the real risk of deterioration [i.e. an escalation in hostilities]. Political officials have begun to suspect that the escalation between Israel and Iran, the publicity of some of the recent operations that reportedly have been carried out and the excessive risk-taking in that sphere are not the product of Israel's national security interests but of Binyamin Netanyahu's political- personal interests.
- “Just like he enlisted the coronavirus to form his previous government,” said one senior political official to me yesterday, “he may now be edging his way towards a controlled escalation with Iran in order to get Bennett and Smotrich down from their high horses, or maybe even other people, such as Gideon Saar or Benny Gantz. You can never know with him.” Not long ago a very senior cabinet minister discovered “by chance” that the security establishment was preparing for a dangerous and particularly far-flung operation with explosive potential. The matter wasn't discussed by the security cabinet because there is no security cabinet. No discussion at all was held by the top cabinet ministers (the prime minister, defense minister, foreign minister, public security minister and so on), and no legally-empowered forum was convened to make a decision. Things get sewn up in one way or another between Netanyahu and Gantz. Is Bibi taking Gantz for a ride? And, if he is, does Gantz realize that Netanyahu is taking him for a ride?
- The minister in question immediately demanded that a meeting be held to discuss the operation. A meeting was held. Not everyone in the room agreed with the decision that had been made by Netanyahu and Gantz. The operation nevertheless received a green light. The criticism about what is beginning to look like centralized management of Israel's most sensitive security affairs hasn't diminished. To the contrary. Top political and security officials recently have been highly critical of Israel's operational and security policy, mainly in all that pertains to the campaign against Iran. Some of that is focused on the Israeli maritime activity. “The benefit derived from those operations is very limited,” said a high-ranking political official to Ma'ariv this week. “With a week or two of elevated oil prices the Iranians make up for all the damage that was caused them,” he said. “But we are taking a risk in an arena in which we suffer from inferiority. Maritime trade routes are an Israeli weak spot. We have very long trade routes that can't be defended. Taking risks in that arena isn't reasonable relative to the payoff.” The critics say that that there are some people who prefer securing short-term successes that do not truly serve Israel's national security interests, at the expense of maintaining the low profile that is so very important for the ongoing war-between-wars effort.

- **“Just imagine if the Iranians begin to sabotage our oil tankers and cargo ships on a regular basis. That has already begun, and the insurance companies will raise their rates sharply as a result. Within a moment we’ll suffer losses that we’ll never be able to recover,”** said the security official. Another senior security official said last week in a closed-door security meeting, **“the advantage of the war- between-wars is that it is below the radar, on a low flame and gets prosecuted with almost no risks. The moment the war-between-wars breaks the water surface, it isn’t the war-between-wars anymore. It forces the Iranians to begin to react. They’ve already begun to react. I’m not at all certain that that is going to serve Israel’s medium and long-term interests.”** The above is not being said about the covert Israeli operations against the Iranian nuclear program, which are ongoing. If the malfunction with the centrifuges in Natanz truly was the result of an Israeli operation, it was a vital operation. At the same time, we mustn’t forget that the Iranians today are far closer today to having a nuclear bomb than ever before. **“We’re able to slow them down with that covert activity, but we won’t be able to stop them,”** said yesterday a senior security official.
- **Yesterday, in response to a request by Gantz, Netanyahu said that he would convene the security cabinet. Separately, MK Gideon Saar submitted a demand to Knesset Speaker Yariv Levin to have a Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee formed immediately. “Having parliamentary supervision over the government on national security issues is vital and necessary, and it is incumbent upon the Knesset to act to establish that without any delay,”** said Saar. Meanwhile, a demand has been made by officials across the length and breadth of the security establishment to have the GSS investigate the alleged leak to the American media ahead of a sensitive operation that was carried out by Israel. To date no proof has been found that any Israeli source leaked details of a military operation prior to its execution to a foreign journalist. **“That investigation needs to be exhaustive,”** said a senior political official to Ma’ariv. **“No harm was done this time, but next time that might not be the case.”**