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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

May 3, 2021

Associated Press

Officials Scrutinized as Israel Mourns 45 Killed at Festival

Officials came under growing scrutiny for ignoring warnings about safety lapses at one of Israel's most visited holy sites, as the country mourned 45 ultra-Orthodox Jews killed in a [stampede](#) at a festival there. The disaster at Mount Meron also heated up the debate over the role of the ultra-Orthodox minority in Israel and the refusal of some of its leaders to acknowledge the authority of the state. The festival had drawn some 100,000 people after powerful [ultra-Orthodox politicians](#) pressured Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and others to lift attendance restrictions. A group of retired police commissioners called on Netanyahu to launch an independent commission with wide-ranging powers to investigate. The body would have the authority to probe senior politicians and decision-makers, going beyond a Justice Ministry inquiry now underway that is looking into possible misconduct by police officers. [Dig Deeper "Biden, Abbas and World Leaders Commiserate as Israel Suffers Worst Civilian Tragedy" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

PM Declines to Offer Bennett Rotation in Secret Meeting

[Netanyahu](#) held a secret meeting with Yamina chairman Naftali Bennett in an effort to form a right-wing government before Netanyahu's mandate from President Reuven Rivlin ends, sources close to Bennett confirmed. Neither party agreed to reveal the content of the meeting, but one side that Netanyahu did not offer Bennett to go first in a rotation deal. The leak that the meeting took place was seen as an attempt by Bennett to pressure opposition leader Yair Lapid to accept his demand that ideological portfolios such as Justice, Education, Interior and Religious Services go to MKs from Yamina and New Hope and not to Labor or Meretz. Sources in the so-called change camp warned Bennett "not to fall into Netanyahu's trap." [Dig Deeper "Due to Meron Tragedy, Time Is Running Out for Netanyahu to Form Gov't" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Israel Hayom

Gantz Says He Has 'Slammed Door' on Unity Gov't

Blue & White leader Benny Gantz took displeased reports that he was considering partnering with Netanyahu and forming another unity government as he did after the 2020 election, saying that he was "committed exclusively to the bloc of change." Gantz vowed that he was not going to go down the same path this time and was determined to seeing Netanyahu toppled. "Even if I am asked hundreds of times, my answer will be crystal clear: I have slammed the door shut for Netanyahu," Gantz said. Netanyahu's deadline for forming a government expires this week, and it is unclear if President Rivlin will tap another member of the Knesset for the job. Regardless, it is unclear if the parties in the anti-Netanyahu bloc will manage to bridge their ideological differences, leading to the very possible scenario that another early election is called. [Dig Deeper "Gantz Asks AG for Position on Forming State Commission Into Meron Disaster" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

3 Wounded in West Bank Drive-By; Shooters at Large

Three people were wounded, two of them seriously, in an apparent drive-by at the Tapuach Junction in the northern West Bank. IDF troops that were stationed nearby opened fire at the suspected vehicle that fled the scene. According to eyewitness accounts, the suspected vehicle stopped near the bus station at the junction and opened fire. At the time of the shooting, six people were present at the scene, and three of them were hurt. Eyewitnesses also said that the suspected vehicle made a U-turn and fled toward Ramallah. Hamas issued a statement shortly after the attack, calling it "a natural response to Israeli crimes, and a show of support to the Palestinians in Jerusalem and the ongoing Palestinian resistance in the West Bank." The Palestinian Islamic Jihad also issued a statement in which it called the event "a message in the name of the entire Palestinian people according to which Jerusalem is a red line and harming the holy sites will blow up in Israel's face." [Dig Deeper "Israeli Security Guard Filmed Beating Palestinian Man in East Jerusalem" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Axios

Biden Met with Mossad Director in DC to Discuss Iran

President Biden met with the director of the Mossad, Yossi Cohen, and discussed Iran, a source familiar with the details confirmed. The White House kept the meeting, first reported by Channel 12, a secret and didn't issue a statement. The White House has not yet responded to questions about the talks. Biden spoke with Netanyahu about the Mount Meron stampede. It was unclear whether the meeting with Cohen took place before or after that call. A source familiar with the meeting said it wasn't planned in advance and was organized on short notice while Cohen was in Washington, DC for other purposes. Netanyahu briefed Cohen before the conversation with Biden on messaging regarding Iran and received an update from him after the meeting, the source said. [Dig Deeper "Israeli Official: Biden Told Mossad Director US Isn't Close to Returning to Iran Deal" \(Axios\)](#)

Reuters

US Denies Iran State Media Saying Prisoner Swap Agreed

The United States denied a report by Iran's state television that the arch-foes had reached a prisoner swap deal in exchange for the release of \$7b frozen Iranian oil funds under US sanctions in other countries. Iranian state television said that Tehran would free four Americans accused of spying in exchange for four Iranians held in the US and the release of the frozen Iranian funds. The US government denied that an agreement has been reached. Iran's envoy to the UN, Majid Takht Ravanchi, said the report could not be confirmed, adding that Tehran has always called for a full prisoner exchange with Washington. The state TV, quoting an unidentified Iranian official, also said British-Iranian national Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe would be released once Britain had paid off a debt on military equipment owed to Tehran. Iran says \$20b of its oil revenue has been frozen in countries like South Korea, Iraq and China under the US sanctions since 2018. [Dig Deeper "US Denies Iran Claims of Prisoner Deal; UK Plays It Down" \(Associated Press\)](#)

Khamenei: Remarks by Zarif in Audio Leak a 'Big Mistake'

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei slammed as a "big mistake" remarks by his foreign minister, a week after audio emerged of the latter bemoaning the military's influence on diplomacy. Top diplomat Mohammad Javad Zarif, a relative moderate, made the remarks in a three-hour "private" conversation first published by media outlets outside Iran a week ago, provoking anger from conservatives. "The country's policies are made of different economic, military, social, scientific, and cultural plans, including foreign relations and diplomacy," Khamenei said in televised remarks. The recording — described as "stolen" by Iran's government — has triggered a heated debate ahead of presidential elections and amid talks in Vienna aimed at reviving a 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers. Khamenei did not explicitly cite the leaked audio or Zarif's name, but the comments, in the last few minutes of an hour-long speech, were clearly targeted at the foreign minister. In response to the supreme leader's speech, Zarif affirmed that he believes Iran's foreign policy should be directed by its leadership and represent the national consensus. [Dig Deeper "Zarif May Well Have Leaked Explosive Tapes Ahead of Presidential Run" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Al-Monitor

Nile Dam Dispute Could Be Heading to Security Council

Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned that the dispute between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam could "boil over," promising that the US would be "fully engaged" in the Horn of Africa. The dispute has been approaching high diplomatic boil. Talks mediated by Democratic Republic of Congo President Felix Tshisekedi, the current head of the African Union, collapsed without agreement April 6. Ethiopia declared it will go ahead with the second filling of the dam, which would diminish the waters that flow to Egypt and Sudan. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said afterward that "an Egyptian water drop shall not be messed with, because all options [are] open." The Egyptian Foreign Ministry sent official letters to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the Security Council regarding Egypt's position on the dam. The dam is a hot and sensitive nationalist topic in Ethiopia. It has the potential to make Addis Ababa a regional energy producer and exporter, allowing the supply of energy to both Ethiopia and the region. Egypt and Sudan depend on the Nile for water and view it as an essential part of their economy and cultural heritage. They want an internationally brokered plan for water management to govern the dam to assure there is no disruption in the water flow.

You Forsook Us

By Michal Manheimer

- **The Mt. Meron disaster is proof of failed management that is the result of a combination of the wishes of self-interested parties and the blind eye that was turned by the state's institutions for the sake of accruing political capital. In all the interviews that were given immediately after the disaster, officials who were behind the planning and who had warned about the dangers, repeatedly and in different ways said, "These were the orders that we received from above," and "leave it be, everything is going to be all right." The licenses to hold the event were signed by Public Security Minister Amir Ohana and the commissioner of police. And I, as a Haredi citizen, ask: in what other mass festival, one that was scheduled in advance, one that is held every year, does the state permit itself to let hundreds of thousands of people go to a place that is not set up to safely hold even a few hundred people? This is not the only mass-attended event in the country. We have soccer games, Independence Day events, gay pride parades. Large festivals contribute to the general morale, and holding them is important, because they build a sense of belonging and identity.**
- **It is immaterial whether the celebrant wears the scarf of their favorite team or a black hat, the responsibility for their safety is that of the government and of those law enforcement agencies that are entrusted with the public safety. There is a special budget and an administration for the Lag B'Omer festivals, which plans the event an entire year beforehand, but it is enough to see the footage from the site of the event to see that that administration is dysfunctional: smashed dumpsters, rusty fences, improvised corridors, a makeshift patchwork amphitheater, a winding access path that had not been fixed in decades. The state turned a blind eye and forsook the tomb compound to self-interested parties and to Haredi pressure groups, which gained control over the public in return for ostensibly looking out for its needs.**
- **Bennett That is how the state ended up permitting, over the course of the years, shacks and temporary structures to be built around the tomb compound, another railing, another space for another interested party, etc. Neither the Interior Ministry nor the Tourism Ministry took an overall view of the site and thought about how to adapt it to its growing needs. The overall development of the tomb compound and the access path were neglected for years on end, not because of an engineering problem or lack of development plans, but because of pressure from powerful people, who influenced the decision-making process. The state consciously does not interfere in the "internal" affair of the Haredi sector and capitulates to pressure in return for political quiet. The coronavirus pandemic, which devastated the Haredi community, proved that at moments of crisis, the Haredi political leadership does not know how to look out for us, Haredi men and women. The disaster on Mt. Meron proved this once again. Even during ordinary times, the Haredi leadership does not always act for the benefit of the Haredi public. It is convenient for them to keep us poor and ignorant, to keep us thinking that the path taken by the leadership is the only path to being Haredi men and women.**

- **That is why one of the lessons—from the coronavirus pandemic and from the Mt. Meron disaster—is that the state must treat us as part of the state, and not make political deals over our heads that perpetuate the current situation, a situation that in ordinary times keeps us living a life of poverty and privation, and which in times of disaster is a veritable danger. Perhaps this will comfort us at this time of tragedy.**

Responsible, But not to Blame

By Ben Caspit

- **“I’m responsible, but not to blame,” said the public security minister. The commander of the Northern District Police announced that he was “responsible, for better and for worse,” but not to blame. So who is to blame? We need to get creative. If we can’t find anyone to blame, someone might blame the government. And you all know who has been prime minister for the past 12 consecutive years, right? So let’s decide that the High Court of Justice is to blame. Yes, yes, those out-of-touch justices! It’s their fault that hundreds of thousands of people throng every year to a compound that is amateurishly run, a time bomb that became a killing field. It was the High Court of Justice that turned this holy site into a money-making machine for rabbis and a range of religious organizations, a thriving industry that taps into authentic, popular beliefs that are then exploited by people with political connections and brokers to generate profits. The Supreme Court is to blame for everything (for the record, [Yaakov] Bardugo wanted to pin the blame on Mandelblit, but that idea was rejected).**
- **While you were resting on the Sabbath, the Bibi-ists got their marching orders: the Supreme Court prevented the state from expropriating the Mt. Meron compound and, therefore, the justices are responsible for the revelers’ shed blood. Before we dive into that despicable lie, let’s just consider for a moment what would have happened had the High Court of Justice allowed the state to expropriate the holy mountain. Just imagine how Avishai Ben Haim, the state butcher [rhymes with state comptroller in Hebrew], would have droned on and on about the white and out-of-touch “hegemony” that had acted to sever the simple Israelis from their holy and sweet rabbi. How dare they, those judges holed up in their ivory tower, crudely trample underfoot the needs and joys of simple Jews?**
- **Following are the facts about the High Court of Justice on this issue: The person who decided to expropriate the compound was Yair Lapid while he was finance minister. He recognized the risk to human life and took action. The religious organizations and trusts that control the compound petitioned the High Court of Justice. Incidentally, that is precisely the purpose of the High Court of Justice’s existence. It is there to provide recourse to anyone who thinks that the state has done them an injustice. In the course of the petition, the state and the petitioners decided to enter into arbitration. The High Court of Justice accepted that decision. Courts always prefer arbitration over long and exhausting court proceedings. Following is a quote from the court ruling: “After hearing the arguments, lengthy arbitration processes were held... since the parties failed to reach a final agreement, we [the court] held another reminder session at the end of which the state and the petitioners agreed to accept the arbitrator’s proposal. An agreement was reached about a temporary arrangement for a three-year period, during which that [arrangement] will be the alternative to expropriation, even as the state has made it clear that it retains its right to resume expropriation if it becomes evident that the arrangement is not being implemented.”**

- The state agreed to a three-year postponement. Now they're blaming the High Court of Justice. But even that misses the point: even if the state never took direct responsibility [for administering] the site, that is no reason for such wanton neglect there. There is no reason why security arrangements should not be dictated and enforced. After all, none of the soccer stadiums in Israel are state property either. Nevertheless, even after Israel [began to] emerge from the coronavirus, stadiums that have the capacity to hold 30,000 spectators are only allowed to hold a quarter of that number. The same applies to other sites that host large events. Security arrangements are drafted and enforced. Every event is licensed. Every event has a producer who serves as the "address," the party responsible for the event. And what is the supreme responsible party? The state, the police, the pertinent ministries under the prime minister. That is otherwise known as responsibility, which [is supposed to] come with the power and with the leadership. Commodities that are sorely lacking in Israel.
- The State Comptroller's Office issued a report back in 2008 in which it found the compound on Mt. Meron to be inadequately equipped to host tens of thousands of revelers. According to the report: "The current situation must not be allowed to continue." Three years later, according to a follow-up report, the situation had not improved. What happened to that report? The same thing that happened to the state comptroller's report about the state of the firefighters' array in Israel. That cost us 44 dead in the Carmel forest fire. The Mt. Meron disaster cost us 45 dead. The common denominator in both events is the identity of the prime minister. Binyamin Netanyahu.
- He shirked his responsibility for the Carmel forest fire, which he foisted on the interior minister, Eli Yishai. My guess is that this time he is going to have a hard time foisting any blame on Aryeh Deri. He needs Deri for his continued survival in other spheres. Hmm... so what about Amir Ohana? Shlomo Levy, the former chairman of the local council [in which Mt. Meron lies], spoke about how terribly afraid the "political echelon" is of the group of holy trusts and the rabbis who administer the site. Top Justice Ministry officials refused to sign off. A bill that would have placed the site under state administration by means of a special designated organization was drafted but was never introduced to the Knesset. The Haredim pressed, and the state capitulated. But the High Court of Justice is to blame.
- On Friday Ma'ariv reported about the report that was written by Asst. Cmdr. Ilan Mor, a senior traffic police official, about Mt. Meron. The title of his report was blood-chilling: "The Mt. Meron festival, erasing the writing on the wall." Everyone read the writing on the wall. Everyone knew what it said. Everyone waited with boundless patience for the disaster to happen. It almost happened every year. The television news studios all have ample archival footage of revelers reporting about how they almost suffocated and were almost trampled, and how children were nearly crushed under the weight of the crowd—and what happened? Nothing happened. The prime minister wouldn't dare take anything out of the hands of Aryeh Deri or the Ashkenazi Haredim. Do you really think he is going to take Mt. Meron away from them? The easier thing to do is to try to pin it on the High Court of Justice. Asst. Cmdr. Mor wasn't the only one to see the "writing on the wall."

- Chico Edri, who was the commander of the traffic police department in 2014 and is now Amir Ohana's director general [of the Public Security Ministry], said the following: "The thing that made things difficult for us was directing the pedestrians. The descent by a huge crowd of people without direction. It was hard to communicate with the population. That is something that we'll have to address next year. If there was one thing that I prayed for throughout the entire process it was that we wouldn't have a mass-casualty event. That is something that we should have addressed broadly."
- The mass-casualty disaster happened. No miracle happened. The real miracle is the fact that it took this long for the disaster to occur. Ahead of the festival this year Netanyahu and his cabinet ministers fought for credit: who got the credit for approving the event on Mt. Meron "without restrictions." Indeed, all of the restrictions were lifted. The crowds thronged to the site. As opposed to every event anywhere in the world, no restrictions were applied to the Mt. Meron festival. Anyone and everyone who comes was allowed in. If anyone has the gall to ask a question or to mount a difficulty, he'll have to deal with the Haredim. Do you expect Netanyahu to clash with the Haredim? In his current situation?
- Radio 2000, a Haredi station, broadcast live from Mt. Meron during the disaster. All of the people responsible for it had been interviewed two hours [before the tragedy]. They heaped praise on one another, bragged and rejoiced prematurely. Here is a brief and blood-chilling summary: "This is incredible! To think that just two weeks ago we were at the peak of the coronavirus, look at the crowds that we've managed to gather here. There isn't any word for that other than miracle... I don't want to pat myself on the back too much; most of the work was done by Rabbi Schwinger from the Holy Sites Center; most of my work is to get the money.... three weeks ago I held a meeting with Minister Deri and all the top Health Ministry officials.
- I came away from that meeting with the impression that this was going to be a small event. But then I was summoned back again to Deri's office and I heard a new tune. After that meeting I phoned my people and said: 'You need to plan for a full event! This is going to be huge! I don't want to be in a situation in which we failed to prepare. I don't care. I took it on myself. The event was organized, all of the switches were turned on. I planned that even though I knew that the money might all go to waste if the event weren't big. But I came to the conclusion that if I didn't make a decision right then and there, there wouldn't be an event. And that is part of the miracle.'" Well, we didn't have a miracle. [...] All the top political officials in Israel, from Netanyahu to Amir Ohana, who posed for a photo-op on Mt. Meron just a few hours before the disaster, via Miri Regev who boasted that she was the person who facilitated the mass celebration, via the police and everyone else who was involved in this event—they have all disappeared now from our screens. They are responsible, of course, but not to blame. That lies only with the High Court of Justice.