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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

July 12, 2021

Ynet News

Ra'Am to Boycott Knesset Votes 'Until Further Notice'

A Ra'am MK said that his party will boycott all Knesset votes and meetings "until further notice." It is believed that Ra'am was displeased with what it perceives as the government's lack of progress on issues such as land rights and housing in the Arab sector which are core issues on the party's agenda. Public broadcaster Kan quoted a source as saying that the party will not allow the coalition to hold talks with predominantly Arab Joint List, a bitter rival of the Islamist faction from which it splintered in the run-up to the last elections. MK Mazen Ghanaim, also of Ra'am, said the party would leave the coalition if Israel were to strike in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. The announcement came after the coalition failed last week to extend the Citizenship Law, which bars Palestinian spouses of Israelis from obtaining permanent residency or citizenship in Israel. [Dig Deeper "After Ra'Am Demand, Government Moves Bedouin Agency to Welfare Ministry"](#) (Times of Israel)

Associated Press

Israeli Court Annuls Parts of Surrogacy Law Excluding Gays

Israel's Supreme Court cleared the way for same-sex couples to have children through surrogate mothers, a move hailed by lawmakers and activists as a victory for LGBTQ rights. The court ruled in 2020 that a surrogacy law, which had expanded access to single women but excluded gay couples, "disproportionately harmed the right to equality and the right to parenthood" and was unlawful. It gave the government a year to draw up a new law, but the Knesset failed to meet the deadline. The court said that "since for more than a year the state has done nothing to advance an appropriate amendment to the law, the court ruled that it cannot abide the continued serious damage to human rights caused by the existing surrogacy arrangement." The change in the law is to take effect in six months to allow the formation of professional guidelines, it said.

Jerusalem Post

Israel to Deduct \$180m From PA Over 'Pay for Slay'

The Israeli security cabinet authorized the deduction of the amount the Palestinian Authority (PA) pays terrorists and their families from the taxes and tariffs Israel collects for the Ramallah-based government. The deduction came to \$180m, which the National Bureau for Counter-Terror Financing in the Defense Ministry reported was the sum of PA funds that went to indirect support for terrorism in 2020. The cabinet authorized that it had read the report, and the Finance Ministry may begin deducting one-12th of the sum each month, according to law. The PA pays convicted terrorists and the families of those killed while committing acts of terrorism a monthly sum. The living terrorists receive more, depending on their prison sentence. PA President Mahmoud Abbas has maintained the policy despite Israel's deductions, as well as the US banning aid to the PA as long as it continues.

Israel Vows to Keep Razing Terrorists' Homes

Israel won't stop demolishing homes of accused terrorists to appease Washington, Communications Minister Yoaz Hendel of the New Hope party said, as the father of a terror victim expressed "shock" at the recent US criticism of the razing of his son's killer's home. "We are doing what's good for the State of Israel," Hendel told Kan. The administration of President Joe Biden last week leveled rare criticism at Israel for the razing of the home of a Palestinian-American suspected in a deadly West Bank shooting attack in May, marking a likely point of friction amid efforts between Washington and Jerusalem to rehabilitate ties. Following Israel's punitive demolition of Muntasir Shalabi's home on Thursday, State Department spokesman Ned Price said officials, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken, had raised concerns over the matter with their Israeli counterparts. [Dig Deeper "Family of Terror Victim Seeks to Confiscate Property of Suspected Killer" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Lapid Meets with Egyptian Counterpart

Foreign Minister and Alternate Prime Minister Yair Lapid met with his Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry in the Belgium capital of Brussels. According to Shoukry's spokesperson, Egypt's top diplomat emphasized "the need to resolve the current stalemate between the Palestinian and Israeli sides, leading to just and comprehensive peace negotiations." Shoukry reiterated Egypt's call for "creating an appropriate atmosphere" to revive talks between Israelis and Palestinians with the aim of reaching a two-state solution. Egypt has in recent years established itself as a central player in mediation efforts between Israel and Hamas in [Gaza](#). Egypt and Israel have maintained close ties over the years, especially in the areas of defense and military intelligence. Last month, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett held a phone conversation with President Abdel-Fattah al-Sissi, discussing, among other issues, the return of Israeli captives in Gaza. [Dig Deeper "Ministers to Review New Plan For Allowing Qatari Funds Into Gaza" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Palestinians Said Drafting List of Demands if Talks Resume

PA President Mahmoud Abbas is drafting a list of demands that would be raised if peace talks with Israel were restarted under US sponsorship, Channel 12 reported. Israeli-Palestinian peace talks have been moribund since 2014. The reported move comes amid indications that the Biden administration is interested in mediating fresh talks that would seek to improve the situation in the West Bank and Gaza and the relations between Israel and the PA, without aiming to reach a comprehensive and final peace deal. Among the demands reportedly on it are the opening of PA political institutes, including the highly symbolic Orient House, and resumption of PA activities in East Jerusalem, which were largely halted or curtailed since 2001 due to the Second Intifada. The PA would also want the situation on the Temple Mount/Haram Al-Sharif to return to how it was two decades ago, when Israel Police activity was limited and visits by Jews were greatly restricted. [Dig Deeper "PA's Abbas Calls to Congratulate Israel's New President" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Bennett: Israel 'on Alert' Over Lebanon Crisis

Israel is monitoring the crisis in Lebanon to ensure it does not spill over the border, Prime Minister Bennett said. "Lebanon is on the verge of collapse, like every country that Iran takes over," he said at the opening of the cabinet meeting. "The citizens of Lebanon are paying a heavy price for the Iranian takeover of the country." Israel is "watching the situation closely... and we will continue to be on alert," he added. The IDF and Israel Police prevented an attempt to smuggle weapons from Lebanon into Israel last Friday, which Bennett cited as "one of many examples." Security forces detained suspects who had 43 pistols in their possession at Ghajar, the Alawite-Arab village astride the border between Lebanon and the Golan Heights. An investigation was underway to determine whether Hezbollah was involved, the IDF said. Defense Minister Benny Gantz sent the UN Interim Force in Lebanon a proposal for Israel to send humanitarian aid to the Lebanese people amid the country's worsening economic and humanitarian crisis. 77% of Lebanese households are unable to buy food, essential drugs have run out, and electricity and gas shortages have become commonplace, the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund reported. The World Bank has said the situation in Lebanon is one of the world's worst financial crises since the 1850s. [Dig Deeper "Government Raises Price of Staple Bread Once More in Lebanon" \(Associated Press\)](#)

US Strikes Deal with Russia to Continue UN Syria Aid

The UN Security Council extended a cross-border aid operation into Syria from Turkey after Russia agreed to a compromise in last-minute talks with the United States, ensuring the delivery of humanitarian help to millions of Syrians for up to 12 months. Russia and the United States, whose relationship has been fraught on a number of issues, both described Friday's unanimous vote by the 15-member Security Council as an important moment. President Biden had raised the importance of the cross-border aid operation with Russian President Vladimir Putin when they met in Geneva in June. The Biden administration warned that any future cooperation with Russia over Syria would be at risk if cross-border aid deliveries were shut down. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres welcomed the council's renewal of the "lifeline" for more than 3.4 million people in need, including 1 million children. However, Guterres' spokesman Stephane Dujarric said, "With additional crossings and expanded funding, the United Nations could do more to help the rising number of people in need." [Dig Deeper "Syria's President Decrees 50% Salary Hike Amid Harsh Crisis" \(Associated Press\)](#)

UAL Signals: Don't Hold Talks with the Joint List

By Arik Bender and Anna Barsky

- **Tensions in the coalition threatened to boil over after MK Walid Taha from the United Arab List announced that his faction would not vote in favor of bills being advanced by the coalition in the Knesset plenum and would not attend Knesset committee meetings until further notice. Several hours later, the cabinet ministers held a rushed telephone vote in which they decided to remove the Department for the Social-Economic Development of Bedouin Society and the Bedouin Development and Settlement Authority from the Economy Ministry's purview and to place it under the Welfare Ministry's purview instead. A spokesperson for the Prime Minister's Office said that the change had been made in keeping with "coalition agreements that were signed before the government was formed." MK Miki Zohar (Likud) described the decision as "Bennett's surrender to the UAL's demands," and said: "It's no surprise that Bennett agrees to everything. That's the way it is when don't have a public [i.e. an electorate] behind you. As long as he's prime minister, our country is going to move backward in every parameter—security, economic and social."**
- **The crisis itself may have been resolved, but the underlying tensions continued to hover in the air, an indication of what might lie in store further down the road. UAL officials were angry because responsibility over the Department for the Social-Economic Development of Bedouin Society and the Bedouin Development and Settlement Authority had not been turned over to their representatives, contrary to the commitments that had been made by Yesh Atid and Yamina in the coalition agreement. UAL officials said that the failure to keep those promises were indicative of an underlying lack of goodwill to move forward on issues that are important to the party and to Arab society. One senior coalition source said: "It wasn't a single specific thing; rather, it was broader criticism by the United Arab List about the attitude towards them within the coalition, [and] about how they had given up the most yet hadn't gotten anything, particularly in all that pertains to the housing crisis and solutions for the Bedouin communities in the south." The anger within the UAL rose further in response to talks that several other members of the coalition had held recently with the Joint List about that party possibly providing the coalition with a "safety net" in plenary votes.**
- **UAL representatives first became suspicious after three Joint List MKs were suddenly absent from the vote on a bill that would facilitate splintering the Likud, thereby allowing the bill to be voted into law. Rumors about how some members of the coalition were courting Ahmad Tibi and his colleagues ahead of the important votes on the budget bill only served to make UAL MKs more suspicious and angrier. United Arab List Chairman MK Mansour Abbas hinted to that anger in a statement that he issued in Arabic. According to that statement: "The UAL is pushing the government and the ministries to make practical decisions for the benefit of our Arab society, and the developments between the UAL and the governmental coalition are unrelated to the Joint List, either closely or distantly."**

- **Abbas issued the following statement: “The UAL has said that the business model that it wants with the government is one of a genuine, equal, clear and transparent partnership, which respects the status of the Arab citizen and his right to change government policy and to make decisions to his benefit. Our society is fed up with the ‘bench player’ model, of playing on the side or beneath the table, a model that is detrimental to the Arab citizen’s status and political achievements.” Last week the coalition failed to win the vote on the citizenship law after two UAL MKs abstained. The government also yanked a motion to vote on an ordinance on the military draft law that pertains to women’s service in the armed forces. The decision to yank the motion from the agenda was made in response to the UAL’s opposition. MK Mazen Ghanaim of UAL said in a radio interview that any decision by the government to attack the Palestinians would prompt the UAL to quit the coalition. “We have red lines,” he said. “Gaza, Lebanon and the Muslim and Christian holy places are red lines.” MK Itamar Ben Gvir of the Religious Zionist Party wrote on Twitter that Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid are “captive in the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood. This statement is further proof that Bennett and Lapid don’t have a legitimate mandate from the Jewish people.”**

To Lebanon and Back Again

By Nahum Barnea

- The passage of time has painted the events of the Second Lebanon War in a more complex array of colors. Fifteen years of absolute quiet along the northern border is nothing to sneer at; but the arsenal of tens of thousands of rockets and missiles that Hizbullah has amassed, including precision-guided missiles that pose a threat to every strategic site in Israel, is nothing to sneer at either. Back in 2006 Lebanon was still a sovereign state. Today is it prey waiting for its predator, a future battlefield for a war that everyone is certain is going to erupt. As soon as the cabinet decided in 2006 to approve a ground maneuver, I began to pester the officers at the IDF Spokesperson's Office to let me embed myself with one of the maneuvering units. Sharon Shalmon, a wonderful officer with the IDF Spokesperson's Office back then, promised me that she would do her best to let me do that. I owe her a lot. One day in the first week of August she phoned me to tell me that I'd been given permission. If you move quickly, you'll be able to make it in time, she said. I was between meetings in Tel Aviv.
- "Drive up to Beit Hillel and join the Nahal Brigade's units," she said to me. I immediately drove up north. On the way I was informed that my authorization to be embedded with the Nahal Brigade had been revoked. You'll go in with the Alexandroni Brigade, I was told. Their staging grounds are in Moshav Zarit. The Alexandroni Brigade is comprised of reservists who are veterans of the Givati, Golani, Nahal and Paratroopers Brigades. I drove westward. Night fell on the Galilee all at once, just like it does in times of peace. In the dark I couldn't make out people, just shadows. The brigade commander, Shlomi Cohen, was busy making final preparations. When he saw me he said, "Get in the Achzarit." Achzarit is the name that was given to a heavy armored personnel carrier that was made from the body of an old T-55 tank, Soviet war booty. The protection it provides is reasonable, but the ride was miserable.
- We were heading to Ras al-Baida, a lovely village on a bluff overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, ten kilometers north of the Israeli border. We passed through Marwahin, Shihin, Jibin and al-Rajamin. IDF troops had taken them in the preceding days of fighting, but Hizbullah guerrillas—Hizbullonim, is what the soldiers called them—repeatedly materialized. I looked at the clothes I was wearing, a light blue t-shirt and jeans. I said to one of the soldiers, when we begin to advance on foot I'm sticking to you. Don't misunderstand me, I said, I just don't want to take a bullet.
- We disembarked from the Achzarit at the top of the hill overlooking Ras al-Baida. Some officers told me afterwards that I had been in the crosshairs of two [IDF] ambushes. They hadn't fired at me only because they were worried that they might hit one of the soldiers accidentally. The brigade headquarters set up base in a villa owned by Abdullah Alian, the owner of a mine removal company. It was a two-story villa with a lovely garden of fruit trees in the yard, which served as the soldiers' latrine. Major Nati Barak, the deputy brigade commander, picked up a shovel that he had taken earlier that day from a Hizbullah shelling position.

- He made his way to the edge of the garden to do his business. A Hizbullah guerrilla, armed with a Kalashnikov and a hand grenade, stood in the darkness on the other side of the hillside terrace, and opened fire. Nati returned fire. He caught two bullets in his left hand. The Hizbullah guerrilla fled. The sound of the gunfire got everyone in the villa on their feet—first the hand grenade and then the bullets. “Ai,” yelled Nati. “Help me.” “We’re under fire, we’re under fire,” yelled the soldiers. They carried the injured officer in and laid him out on the floor of the bedroom, which had been converted into a war room “Ehud, it hurts. Do something,” Nati cried out. The doctor, a neurology intern at Beilinson Hospital, gave him a shot of morphine. Nati sighed. The pain was awful, I reported back then, but lurking underneath it was the sense of insult: he, the deputy brigade commander, instead of helping others, was lying helpless in his soldiers’ arms. An hour later a helicopter arrived, coming from the direction of the Mediterranean. It landed for a minute outside the house, while the soldiers around rained down fire on the village.
- Nati Barak has a Ph.D. in history and economics. He was in the UK when the war broke out. He boarded a plane and enlisted. We had spoken two hours before he was injured. He said that the IDF needed to hit Lebanon hard, with all its might, otherwise Israel would lose its power of deterrence. “We’re being merciful towards the wrong mothers,” he said, quoting a pervasive saying. We spoke again while he was convalescing in Rambam Hospital. Are you still in favor of deploying a large number of troops to Lebanon, I asked him. “Do you know what?” he replied. “We need to leave. Even if they say we lost, we need to leave.” Fifteen years have passed, and Dr. Nati Barak is the principal of Yuvalim, a school in Or Yehuda. It is one of the best schools in Israel, the pride of the town. Ninety percent of its students fully matriculate. In 2020 he was given an award for his work in education. A World Cup soccer championship was held in the summer of 2006, just like one was held in the summer of 1982, during the First Lebanon War.
- A flag of one of the countries competing in the games was raised over every villa in the village. The civilians had all fled, but the flags remained, just like a wedding without any guests. Italy ultimately won the World Cup, but the soldiers weren’t interested in soccer. They told me the truth. They told me how they had gone to the IDF’s emergency warehouses in Ein Zeitim to pick up their duffle bags only to find that they were empty. There had been budget cuts, and their equipment had either been needed in Gaza or had been stolen. They told me about the water supply that never arrived, and about the food that wasn’t delivered. The Air Force refused to use helicopters to deliver water, but when nine soldiers dehydrated, the Air Force was forced to land helicopters to take three of them to be hospitalized. They told me about how their thirst and hunger had become so acute that they were driven to loot a local grocery store. When officers in the division heard about that they threatened them with court-martial.
- At Their chief complaint was about the orders that weren’t issued. “This is a war of the combatants, not the generals,” said to me one of the officers. He told me about missions that were changed once every few hours without any visible logic, conflicting messages and efforts to dodge responsibility. I left Lebanon after a few days. The trip in the Achzarit took five and a half hours this time. The soldiers gave me a uniform, but with one condition: that I phone their families.

- I spent the entire trip from Zarit to Jerusalem on the phone. That kept me from falling asleep. The people on the other end weren't always gracious: why are you out and not my son? asked wives and mothers. The biggest problem was with the Russian mothers. They didn't understand Hebrew well. I was afraid that they might think that I was calling to tell them that their sons had either been injured or killed. I enlisted one of the soldiers' girlfriend, who spoke Russian. We divided up the phone calls between us. I wrote a very critical piece about the prosecution of the war and about the insistence to push on, despite the calls for a cease-fire. "There's no point investing in a lost cause," I wrote. "Adding more ground forces to the ones that are already stuck there isn't going to produce the hoped-for change in the Lebanese gamble.
- Take what you're being offered, Olmert. Take it and run." The next day Olmert phoned me. He explained to me why he disagreed. To his credit I have to say that he spoke quietly, without a hint of a temper. I believe that our disagreement about the war still stands today. A few weeks later the Alexandroni Brigade's troops were convened. The soldiers aired their complaints, and the brigade commander accused them of lacking motivation. Some of them made their way to the Rose Garden in Jerusalem [outside the Knesset] to hold a demonstration, demanding a commission of inquiry. Their anger was genuine. The politicians buzzed around them. A lot of money from untraceable sources was poured into those demonstrations, and they were overwhelmed with manipulations. They had been mistreated in Lebanon only to be exploited in Jerusalem.