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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

July 14, 2021

I24 News

Foreign Minister Yair Lapid Goes Into Quarantine

Foreign Minister and Alternate Prime Minister Yair Lapid has gone into quarantine as a precaution following his visit to Brussels to meet with European leaders, according to Israeli media. One of Lapid's advisors, who was on his return flight from Brussels, reportedly tested positive for COVID-19. At the advice of the Israeli Health Ministry, everyone on board the flight has entered into quarantine pending further instructions. Lapid tested negative for the coronavirus as did everyone else on board the flight except for the advisor. Despite self-isolating, Lapid is keeping a busy schedule as the nation's top diplomat. While in Brussels, Lapid met with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry and European foreign ministers, including German Foreign Minister Heiko Mass and Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg. [Dig Deeper "Bennett, Netanyahu Lock Horns Over COVID Resurgence" \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

Times of Israel

Israel, Morocco in Talks to Hold Official Lapid Visit to Rabat

The Israeli Foreign Ministry is in talks with Morocco to arrange an official visit by Foreign Minister Lapid to the Arab nation, according to diplomatic sources. Lapid invited his Moroccan counterpart, Nasser Bourita, to visit Israel. After a 20-year lull in diplomatic relations, Israel and Morocco renewed their ties late last year, amid a wave of normalization agreements between Israel and Arab countries. While Jerusalem and Rabat did not in the past have full relations — with diplomatic offices in each other's capitals instead of embassies — they maintained close official ties until Morocco suspended them with the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000. Direct flights between the countries are expected to begin in a matter of weeks.

Reuters

Cabinet to Vote on 2021-2022 Budget in Early August

Finance Minister Avigdor Lieberman said he aimed to present the 2021-2022 state budget draft to cabinet ministers for a vote in the first week of August. The Knesset would then hold its preliminary vote on the budget in September with final parliamentary approval for the 14-month spending package expected in the first half of November, he told a news conference. Lieberman, who took office last month and has vowed to boost employment levels, said he had not yet set budget deficit targets for 2021 or 2022. But when asked about the Bank of Israel's deficit estimate of 7.1% of gross domestic product for this year, he said: "It's not too optimistic." Israel is using a pro-rated version of the 2019 budget that was approved in March 2018. Two years of political stalemate and four elections culminated in the formation of a new government led by former tech executive Naftali Bennett in June, unseating Benjamin Netanyahu after 12 years of premiership. [Dig Deeper "Israeli Prime Minister's Dysfunctional, Fragile Coalition Hits Reality" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Israel Bars Jailed Palestinian From Daughter's Funeral

Israel refused to let a prominent jailed Palestinian lawmaker attend her daughter's funeral despite a campaign by activists and human rights groups for her to be released on humanitarian grounds. Khalida Jarrar, 58, a leading member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, has been in and out of Israeli prison in recent years. A military court sentenced her to two years in March for being a member of an outlawed group. With time served, she is set to be released in October. The PFLP has an armed wing and is considered a terrorist group by Israel and Western countries, but Jarrar has not been implicated in attacks. Jarrar was sentenced to 15 months in 2015 on charges of incitement and membership in the PFLP. She has also been held for months at a time in what's known as administrative detention, under which Israel detains Palestinian suspects for lengthy periods without charge. [Dig Deeper "Israeli Guard Lightly Wounded in West Bank Shooting, Attacker Arrested" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

IDF, Shin Bet, Gantz Balked At Seizing PA Taxes

Defense Minister Benny Gantz, Transportation Minister Merav Michaeli, and Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz all had reservations about a security cabinet decision to withhold hundreds of millions of dollars from the Palestinian Authority (PA) to offset funds that it paid to terrorists and their families, Walla reported. The report said the ministers' positions were in line with those of the military and the Shin Bet. The Security Cabinet eventually decided to seize nearly \$183m from the PA over funds it paid out over the past year. The three ministers were reportedly concerned about the timing of the move due to the financial strife the PA is already facing. Walla cited two unnamed senior officials familiar with events at the cabinet meeting, who said that the military's chief liaison to the Palestinians, Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) Major-General Ghassan Alian, cautioned against withholding the taxes, reporting to ministers that a similar offset from 2019 had not yet been completed. [Dig Deeper "PA PM: We Must Build Confidence Before Israeli-Palestinian Peace Talks" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Israel Wants Voucher System for Foreign Aid to Gaza

Israel wants foreign aid to Gaza disbursed through a voucher system, as a safeguard against donations being diverted to bolster the Palestinian enclave's Hamas rulers and their arsenal, a government minister said. Humanitarian agencies put the latest reconstruction costs for the impoverished Gaza Strip at \$500m following 11 days of cross-border fighting in May. Qatar bankrolled more than \$1b worth of construction and other projects in Gaza, some of it in cash, after a war in 2014. The payments were monitored and approved by Israel, and Doha pledged another \$500m in late May. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett wants a shift in policy, Internal Security Minister Omer Barlev said. Hamas, which has previously denied using Gaza aid for its military, did not immediately comment. [Dig Deeper "Egypt Expresses Growing Optimism on Israel-Hamas Prisoner Exchange" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Facebook Blocks Hamas-Affiliated News Agency

Facebook blocked the Hamas-affiliated Gaza news agency Shehab, accusing it of violating the social media network's community standards against promoting violence despite being notified. The Facebook page was originally created in 2011 and has nearly 7.5m followers. Despite recent outreach to its administrators regarding our policies, we have had to disable the Shehab News Agency Facebook page for repeatedly violating our community standards," a Facebook spokesperson said. "We have previously explained to the Shehab News team that, in order to keep our community safe and prevent harm, we do not allow praise or support for groups, leaders or individuals who have engaged in violence." Hamas denounced the Facebook move, calling it an "unjust decision and an attack on media freedoms and freedom of expression." Shehab Agency is a professional agency committed to professional ethics and internationally recognized media standards, so it was able to possess such a wide presence in the media space," Head of Hamas' Media Division Abroad Rafat Morra said. Shehab News Agency has been in operation since 2007. The Facebook page was previously blocked in 2015 for featuring "graphic violence," according to the Palestinian Wafa news agency. Other pages affiliated with Hamas, including the Safa news agency, have been removed from Facebook in the past.

Poll: A Quarter of US Jews Think Israel Is 'Apartheid State'

A survey of US Jewish voters taken after the Israel-Gaza conflict finds that a sizable minority believes some of the harshest criticisms of Israel, including that it is committing genocide and apartheid. Among respondents to the survey commissioned by the Jewish Electorate Institute, a group led by prominent Jewish Democrats, 34% agreed that "Israel's treatment of Palestinians is similar to racism in the United States," 25% agreed that "Israel is an apartheid state" and 22% agreed that "Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians." Among younger voters included in the survey, agreement with those statements was higher, though still in the minority. The findings are striking as mainstream pro-Israel organizations struggle to make the case that Israel is central to Jewish identity and that criticism of it often veers into antisemitism. They suggest that many American Jews agree with statements by some of Israel's harshest critics on the left made during the Gaza-Israel conflict in May, including in some cases by a handful of Democratic members of Congress who were then criticized by their colleagues. The new survey presents the latest challenge as the new Israeli government endeavors to repair ties with a US Jewish community that to a degree became alienated from Israel during the 12 years Netanyahu was prime minister. Surveys have found that Israeli and American Jews know little about one another. [Dig Deeper "US Lawmakers Castigated Abbas for Terror Payments During 'Tense' Ramallah Meet" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Has Israel's Army Become Too Small?

By Ben Caspit

- The outgoing deputy head of the Israel Defense Forces, Maj. Gen. Eyal Zamir, is not big on interviews and rarely speaks in public. At a handover ceremony for his successor Maj. Gen. Herzl Halevi this week, Zamir dropped a bomb. Zamir, who was tasked with the IDF's force buildup, essentially said that the IDF is not big enough and could find itself lacking the critical mass it needs to defeat Israel's enemies. "We could be facing a long, heavy, multi-theater campaign, combined with domestic challenges," Zamir warned. To overcome these threats on its borders and to its heartland, Israel needs "decision-making ability, breathing space and a strong reserve," he added. "In my opinion, the IDF is on the verge of the minimum size needed to face more complex threats than those we have experienced in recent years. Along with advanced technological capabilities, Israel also needs a critical mass of people to improve the IDF's overall quality and quantity," Zamir said. Zamir's warning was prompted by the latest round of fighting between Israel and Gaza and an unprecedented quasi-uprising by small groups of Arab residents in Israel's mixed Jewish-Arab towns.
- As the rioting and fighting were underway in May, several rockets were fired from Lebanon into Israel, though the northern front remained calm. The simultaneous violence rang alarm bells for the top IDF's brass given the police's initial failure over several days to quell the domestic rioting even as the IDF was bombing targets in Gaza. This convergence of threats prompted doubts among senior office holders regarding the IDF's capacity to deal effectively with a simultaneous attack on Israel by Hezbollah, Hamas, Arab-Israeli citizens and perhaps other elements such as Iran, its proxy Shiite militias or the Islamic State group in Sinai. The force level of the IDF's regular and reserve troops, and especially of its ground army, has declined gradually and consistently over the past 15 years.
- The government slashed defense spending at the beginning of the millennium, then raised it a bit following the 2006 Second Lebanon War, but overall, today's IDF is far smaller than it was during Israel's first half-century. The budget cuts reflected the decline or disappearance of the conventional enemies that threatened Israel's existence in the past. Its one-time major enemies, Egypt and Jordan, adhere to the peace agreements they signed with Israel. The civil war has greatly eroded the power of Syrian strongman President Bashar al-Assad. Lebanon is mired in chaos and verging on bankruptcy. There are no longer armored divisions massed along Israel's borders and the contemporary threat landscape has changed completely. The IDF has invested most of its energy and resources in a new array of modern-day resources: cutting-edge technology, cyber abilities and intelligence, making it what is considered one of the world's most highly advanced military forces. But a stubborn prophet of doom has been unsettling Israel's defense agencies. Maj. Gen. (res.) Yitzhak Brick is a Suez Canal hero of the 1973 war with Egypt, an armored corps veteran who served for a decade as the IDF's ombudsman.

- He has since devoted his life to dire warnings about defense cuts and the declining power of Israel's ground forces, claiming the IDF was atrophying and no longer prepared to physically defend the State of Israel. Brick's was long a lone voice in recent years, but now a serving general, the deputy chief of staff of the IDF, has joined his one-man band. "We are scraping the very bottom of the barrel in terms of tank numbers," a former top IDF source told AI-Monitor on condition of anonymity. "The number of combat divisions has also been stagnant for years, the ground forces are not holding enough exercises and most importantly, the reserve forces have undergone accelerated cuts. The IDF is no longer the people's army and the reserves are no longer the secret of Israel's power. This is troubling," he added. The IDF is suffering a personnel shortage, especially in the field combat units. One of the root causes of this crisis is the growth of the Arab and ultra-Orthodox Jewish populations, who are not conscripted. These groups now account for nearly 50% of the draft-aged cohort.
- A decline in the motivation of young Israelis to sign up for combat units along with increased interest in reserve service and service in the IDF's technological units also contribute to the problem, as does the recent shortening of mandatory military service from 36 to 30 months. "Our enemies have realized," said the former top military source, "that if they operate simultaneously, their prospects of success increase." Israel has in the past won multi-theater wars, such as the 1948 War of Independence (repelling an invasion of the fledgling state by several Arab armies and Palestinian groups), the 1967 Six Day War (vanquishing three Arab states and Iraqi reinforcements) and the 1973 Yom Kippur War (overcoming a combined surprise attack by the Syrian and Egyptian armies). However, the IDF had thousands of tanks and hundreds of thousands of reserve troops in those days. This is no longer true and during the recent Operation Guardian of the Walls, the IDF found itself for the first time in many years dealing simultaneously with several arenas. "And this is even without Hezbollah intervention," the former military official told AI-Monitor.
- "Hezbollah's firepower is 10 times that of Hamas, its ground forces are trained and very experienced, its fighters have gained self-confidence during the Syrian civil war and it is also advanced in terms of intelligence, operational ground forces and even technological means. We must be able to fight on several fronts at the same time and win. Right now, I am not sure that is the case." One of the ideas to emerge recently in this regard is the formation of a national guard under the purview of the police of reserve soldiers who undergo specialized training. This force of several battalions will beef up the police in quelling domestic riots that could disrupt the call-up of military reserves and the movement of IDF troops in times of war, leaving the IDF free to deal with external enemies. The idea, proposed recently by IDF Operations Chief Maj. Gen. Aharon Haliwa, is in its infancy.

Herzog's Political Blitz

By Arik Bender & Anna Barsky

- **Political officials in Jerusalem said in the aftermath of the surprising telephone conversation that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan held with President Yitzhak Herzog that they believed that further talks between the two countries were now likely to be held. The telephone call was placed by Erdogan, who wanted to congratulate Herzog upon his assumption of office. The conversation was arranged in advance in talks that were overseen by the Foreign Ministry and President Herzog's political adviser, Zvi Aviner-Vapni. Herzog and Erdogan spoke for 40 minutes in a conversation that was described as being positive. Both men said they considered Israeli-Turkish relations to be very important to the security and stability of the Middle East, and cited the great potential for cooperation between the two countries on a range of issues, especially in the spheres of energy, tourism and technology.**
- **Herzog and Erdogan noted that bilateral commercial trade between the two countries had continued despite the coronavirus pandemic, and spoke about the need to expand the economic ties between them. The President's Residence issued the following statement: "The presidents ascribe great importance to holding ongoing talks and continuous dialogue, despite the differences of opinion, and to do so with the goal of advancing positive steps towards resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that might also contribute to improving Israeli-Turkish relations." The telephone conversation with Erdogan was one of the peak moments of a diplomatic blitz that Herzog has mounted ever since his election. Herzog has also spoken with King Abdullah of Jordan and PA Chairman Abu Mazen. Herzog met yesterday for his first work meeting with the vice president of Equatorial Guinea, and later in the evening attended a meeting of the global forum to fight anti-Semitism. Today he is slated to attend the ceremony inaugurating the United Arab Emirates' new embassy in Israel.**
- **One MK yesterday commented on the high pace of Herzog's diplomatic activism, and said he wondered whether Herzog wasn't trying to act as a second foreign minister. Officials in the President's Residence said yesterday that all of the talks and meetings that President Herzog has held had been coordinated with the Foreign Minister and had been held with the full knowledge of Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and Defense Minister Benny Gantz. One President's Residence official said that the president was utilizing his status as a statesman who was known and respected internationally to help the new government. "Nothing is being done over Lapid's head or any other minister," said the official. One official in the President's Residence said that Herzog is expected to continue to take the initiative on the diplomatic stage and to reach out to Arab countries—but only in full coordination with the prime minister and the pertinent cabinet ministers. The official said that the president has no intention of encroaching on anyone else's territory. "Anywhere that the president is able to open doors in the international arena, he'll do so," said the President's Residence official.**

- **Foreign Minister Yair Lapid addressed the political talks that Herzog has held in the past few days, telling Foreign Ministry officials that “Herzog is a partner and everything is being done in coordination and in dialogue between us. We want to capitalize on his capabilities and connections. As far as I’m concerned, we’re a single coordinated unit.” Lapid went on to say: “In my view Herzog isn’t ‘competing’ with the Foreign Ministry. He is an incredible asset thanks to his network of relationships around the world. There isn’t a world leader who doesn’t know him and like him. There aren’t any doors that are shut to him, from Buckingham [Palace] to the White House. And, also, thanks to the fact that he is a close friend and we share a similar worldview, that allows us to plan and do things together that are good for the country. I am counting on him a lot in the context of our effort to change and improve our standing in the world, mainly in dealing with liberal governments.” While the president’s international efforts have received the most public media attention, Herzog has also begun to work domestically as well. Yesterday he met with Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi for a first work meeting. The chief of staff reviewed the security challenges facing Israel and operational issues. The president thanked the chief of staff and said he has full confidence in the IDF and its commanders. Tomorrow the president is expected to visit a mixed city.**