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## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Thursday, July 15*

### Headlines:

- **Knesset Rejects Compensation Bill to Meron Victims**
- **Government Faces Crisis Over Cannabis Law**
- **UAE Opens Embassy in Israel, Hails Trade Ties**
- **Turkish Ruling Party: Turkey, Israel Want to Improve Ties**
- **Likud MK Advances Law to Prevent Reopening of Consulate**
- **Bennett to Meet Biden in Washington Next Month**
- **Iran Not Ready for Nuclear Talks Until Raisi Takes Over**
- **IDF Concerned Crisis in Lebanon Could Have Repercussions**

### Commentary:

- **Yedioth Ahronoth: “How to Beat a Pandemic with Words”**  
- By Sarit Rosenblum
- **Yedioth Ahronoth: “Victory with the Help of Rubble”**  
- By Ben-Dror Yemini

# News Excerpts

July 15, 2021

Times of Israel

## **Knesset Rejects Compensation Bill to Meron Victims**

A proposal to compensate families of victims of the April 30 disaster at Mount Meron — which left 45 people dead and over 150 injured in a deadly crush — failed to pass a preliminary Knesset vote. The bill, submitted by opposition MK Ya'akov Asher (United Torah Judaism), was shot down 59-55, as the government said it had not yet formulated a position on the matter, according to a minister in the Finance Ministry, Hamad Amar. The bill proposed a financial framework to assist the victims of the Meron disaster, which included the formation of a committee that would formulate criteria for the compensation, including the number of victims in a family and its sources of income. However, Amar — who is from the Yisrael Beytenu party — said the current wording of the law would lead to excessive costs. He said his office would examine the budgetary implications at a later date. [Dig Deeper “AG Places Criminal Probe Into MT. Meron Disaster on Hold” \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

Arutz Sheva

## **Government Faces Crisis Over Cannabis Law**

A fierce debate erupted within the coalition government over an upcoming vote on a bill to significantly expand access to medicinal marijuana in Israel. The bill, drafted by New Hope MK Sharren Haskel, would broadly decriminalize ownership of cannabis when it is intended for one's own use for medicinal purposes. While the coalition largely backs the legislation, the United Arab List has thus far refused to agree to support the bill, forcing the government to push off the preliminary vote in the Knesset plenum. The government's failure to win backing for the bill led to a fiery debate during a recent meeting of coalition leaders, with Knesset Speaker Idit Silman (Yamina) blasting plans to bring the bill to a vote without ensuring its passage – citing the recent failure of the government to pass the Citizenship Law. [Dig Deeper “New Israeli Government Stuck in Survival Mode” \(Axios\)](#)

Reuters

## **UAE Opens Embassy in Israel, Hails Trade Ties**

The United Arab Emirates became the first Gulf state to open an embassy in Israel, as its envoy hailed the trade and investment opportunities that closer ties would bring at a flag-raising ceremony also attended by Israel's president. Brought together by shared unease about Iran, the UAE and Bahrain normalised relations with Israel last year under the "Abraham Accords" crafted by the administration of then President Donald Trump. The opening of the UAE embassy, which is situated in the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange, followed the inauguration of Israel's embassy in the UAE last month. The regional rapprochement has been deplored by the [Palestinians](#), who want their demands for statehood free of Israeli occupation addressed first. The UAE has said last year's US-brokered accords, which challenged a decades-old allegiance to Palestinian ambitions as a major driver of Arab policy, would ultimately benefit the Palestinians.

## **Turkish Ruling Party: Turkey, Israel Want to Improve Ties**

Turkey and Israel have agreed to work towards improving their strained relations after a rare phone call between their presidents, a spokesman for Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party said. The two countries expelled ambassadors in 2018 after a bitter falling-out. Ankara has condemned Israel's occupation of the West Bank and its treatment of Palestinians, while Israel has called on Turkey to drop support for the Palestinian terror group Hamas that rules Gaza. Both sides say the other must move first for any rapprochement. Bilateral trade has remained strong amid the political disputes. In May, Erdogan branded Israel a "terror state" after Israeli police shot rubber bullets and stun grenades towards Palestinian youths at the Al-Aqsa Mosque in the Old City of Jerusalem in the run-up to the 11-day conflict between Israel and Hamas. Israel accuses Turkey of aiding members of Hamas. Turkey has also recently been trying to repair its frayed ties with Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

## **Likud MK Advances Law to Prevent Reopening of Consulate**

Likud MK Nir Barkat submitted a bill that would prevent the US from reopening its Jerusalem consulate to the Palestinians, which the Biden administration announced in May that it plans to do. However, several European countries already house their diplomatic missions to the Palestinians in Jerusalem as part of their support for a future Palestinian capital in the city. It is unclear whether the law would apply to them as well. Barkat's proposed legislation would ban any country from establishing a diplomatic mission in Jerusalem that is not a mission to Israel. The bill further specifies that any mission established to provide consular services specifically to Jerusalem residents will require special permission from the Israeli government. As part of an effort to restore relations with the Palestinians, Biden campaigned on reopening both the consulate in Jerusalem as well as the Palestinian Liberation Organization's mission in Washington, which was shuttered by Trump in 2018. Both moves will face legal hurdles. Even without the legislation Barkat has proposed, some degree of Israeli approval will be required.

## **Bennett to Meet Biden in Washington Next Month**

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett will fly to Washington in August for his first face-to-face meeting with President Joe Biden since taking office in June, reports Israel's Channel 12 news. Iran will reportedly be the premier's top agenda item to discuss at the White House, including Israeli concerns about the Islamic Republic's incoming president, Ebrahim Raisi, with the hardliner set to take the helm in early August. Bennett is reportedly considering taking the US trip on a weekend so as not to risk missing any votes in the Knesset as the new "change bloc" coalition is held together by a razor-thin margin, meaning every vote counts. Biden phoned Bennett after Israel's new government was sworn in last month, saying that Washington remained committed to Israel's security and would work closely with its new government. In a statement, Biden welcomed the new government coalition and sought to reaffirm US-Israel ties. [Dig Deeper "IDF Advances Settler E1 Project Ahead of Bennett-Biden Meeting" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## **Iran Not Ready for Nuclear Talks Until Raisi Takes Over**

Iran is not prepared to resume negotiations on coming back into compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal until Iranian President-elect Ebrahim Raisi's administration has begun, a diplomatic source said. The source, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said Iran had conveyed this to European officials acting as interlocutors in the indirect US-Iranian negotiations and that the current thinking is the Vienna talks will not resume before mid-August. Talks began in April on reviving the 2015 nuclear deal, formally named the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) but have appeared stuck since their sixth round ended on June 20, with no sign when they may resume. The agreement, which Democratic former President Barack Obama negotiated and Republican former President Donald Trump abandoned, struck a balance between Iran accepting limits to its nuclear program in return for relief from economic sanctions. A State Department spokesperson confirmed that Iran had asked for more time because of its presidential transition. [Dig Deeper "Gantz: We Must 'Adapt Our Plans' to Prepare For a Nuclear Iran" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## **IDF Concerned Crisis in Lebanon Could Have Repercussions**

With the Lebanese economy in a free-fall, the IDF is concerned that there may be an increase of incidents such as drug smuggling and infiltrations of migrant workers or refugees along its northern border. "The Lebanese economy is not good, and that can lead to things happening on the border," Col. Raz Haimlich, Commander of the Artillery Corps Fire Brigade 411th "Keren" Battalion told The Jerusalem Post. Troops under his command helped thwart an attempt to smuggle 43 pistols and ammunition from Lebanon near the cross-border village of Ghajar. According to Haimlich, it was one of the largest smuggling attempts in years and was estimated to value \$820,000. While smuggling on the border has been going on for years, the last attempt was worth "a lot of money." According to a recent assessment released by UNICEF, 77% of Lebanese households don't have enough money to buy food. UNICEF has started giving cash handouts in US dollars to the families of some 70,000 Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian children to at risk of "child labor, early marriage or exclusion from schooling" due to the crisis. The Lebanese Armed Force is also feeling the economic crisis with troops earning between \$400-500 a month. The LAF has even announced it is offering tourists helicopter rides for \$150 dollars in order to make money. The military has seen a concerning connection between criminal networks and terror in the smuggling of drugs and weapons into Israel from south Lebanon. [Dig Deeper "IDF Requests Billions in Budget Increase to Boost Iran Attack Capabilities"](#)

## **How to Beat a Pandemic with Words**

By Sarit Rosenblum

- **After four successful “exits” that are estimated to have enriched him by tens of millions of dollars, our high-tech prime minister, Naftali Bennett, has now established a new start-up that is based on a revolutionary and unprecedented notion: how to beat a pandemic with words. After mocking the dramatic press conferences that his predecessor and former mentor, “MK Bibi,” routinely used to hold, Bennett showed the Israeli public that he, exactly as he promised in his campaign, truly is handling the coronavirus crisis differently. Aside from the amusing similarities in the two men’s presentation—with slides and cumbersome hand movements to illustrate the rising infection rate, the difference between them was clear: instead of Netanyahu’s stern face—Bennett offered a lighthearted and smiling performance; instead of warnings—soothing words; instead of stricter restrictions—eased restrictions.**
- **People who defied the two-week quarantine directive will now be able to play hooky more easily from a shortened one-week quarantine. Hurray. The threatening and troubled tone of voice that was used by the former prime minister, who warned us for over a year to take the virus seriously, has now been replaced with a direct and chummy call on the public to comply with the directives. The main points of his new and promising plan to defeat the coronavirus, we learned, are: masks, vaccines and social distancing. Wow, how come we didn’t think of that sooner? Within five weeks, the prime minister promised, we can lower the infection rate. If you have faith, you have nothing to fear. That is unfortunate. In the new social contract that he wants to reach with Israel’s citizens—one that he appears to have reached only with himself—Bennett asked us to be extra careful about these three things. The public, he said over and over, must do only three things. Let’s beat this, he said, and made a special effort to persuade his young listeners: go and get vaccinated. But it seems that our new prime minister has forgotten that it takes two to tango.**
- **Or, as he put it: we can beat the Delta variant together, the government and the public. He forgot that the new schoolyear is scheduled to begin in another month and a half. Aside from a vague promise about not holding classes on Zoom, not a word was uttered about any plan that might enable our children to continue to learn safely even in a situation in which thousands and possibly tens of thousands of new people are testing positive daily, and even more important—that they also return home healthy. The schoolyear for Haredim, which starts on August 9, was also forgotten amid all the smiles, as well as the upcoming Eid al-Adha, which is known to be a catalyst for mass infection. It’s just us and the masks. Other countries that are coping with violent infection waves from the Delta variant just as we are have made every effort to minimize the damages by means of a range of measures. Each country is trying in its own way to protect its citizens’ health and to maintain normal life. Only here has the Bennett-Horowitz duo preferred to dump responsibility on us, in the hope that some miracle will save us.**

- **Instead of taking resolute steps to stamp out the virus—steps that are now urgently needed—the confused public, which really does not know what is being asked of it, received a strong ego massage. “Let’s beat this thing, let’s do it, we can do it!” said our guru, Naftali, boosting our self-confidence, and added: “Something good is happening here.” But anyone who read carefully between the optimistic lines could see that Bennett realizes very well where we are headed. “The world is turning red,” he warned, and the word “lockdown” kept returning again and again in the fine print of his speech. The number of people testing positive and the number of people hospitalized in serious condition is climbing, people who were vaccinated are becoming infected and dying, and our children are being exposed to infection by a virus that nobody can assess how it will affect them. The writing is on the wall in huge letters, but nobody wants to read it.**

## **Victory with the Help of Rubble**

By Ben-Dror Yemini

- A new poll that was released just yesterday found that 25% of American Jews think that Israel is an apartheid state (only 52% completely disagree), and 22% think that Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians (only 62% completely deny the allegation). If it had seemed to us that the anti-Israel brainwashing wasn't working, we should think again. There are some people who understand these matters much better we do. "The pressure on Israel from international public opinion is stronger than any weapon in the possession of the axis of resistance," said Hassan Nasrallah a few days ago. It's true that Hizbullah can afford to build a warehouse for long-range rockets, as reported yesterday, 25 meters from a school, and it's true that Lebanon is collapsing. It is also true that the Hamas government is the cause of its ruin. But none of that matters. They're allowed. That is the reason that they perceive the last conflict as having ended in "victory" for Hamas and the pictures of the destruction that Israel caused are in fact victory pictures.
- The poll in the US came at a good time to prove that what Nasrallah's words were not empty bragging. It is reality. Even prominent Israel supporters, such as Senator Bob Menendez, the chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, endorsed a critical and unprecedented position toward Israel just a few days after Operation Guardian of the Walls (the recent conflict with Hamas in Gaza) began. The time has come for our decision-makers to understand that propaganda plays a central role in the conflict. Nasrallah is doing us a favor when he presents matters as they are. The poll is also troubling. The question is whether we will pick up the gauntlet or whether we will continue to deceive ourselves that an F-16 will decide the outcome of the war. It isn't easy to handle photographs of buildings that were turned into rubble and children who were killed. No PR campaign will help. In the current era, with social media, when every cellphone is a broadcasting station, Israel's loss on that front is foretold.
- And if this is what happened in Operation Guardian of the Walls, what will happen in the next clash? Had the bombardments of the Allies on Germany during World War II been reported the way Israel's bombing Hamas and Hizbullah is reported, the outcome would definitely have been that we need to hold protests in support of Germany and accuse the US and Britain of war crimes. Nasrallah has long since understood that. So has Hamas. They use that. And Israel? It is lagging far behind. Will the new government make any changes? It's too soon to tell. A review of what Foreign Minister Yair Lapid told the EU's Foreign Affairs Council, shows that there may be a change for the better. But the road ahead is long until a change in public opinion is achieved. We should not spurn public opinion, as some laypeople suggest we do. Public opinion has had an impact in the past. For example, it influenced decisions made by dockworkers in the US and in Europe. They refused to load or unload Israeli ships. In the next clash, things are liable to be a lot worse. Things are likely to go well beyond demonstrations, articles and statements. There will be boycotts that are liable to halt or delay vital shipments, including of ordnances.

- **It has already begun to happen. What do we do? For the first time, I am raising the idea that Israel sponsor a dramatic, public Marshall Plan for the Gaza Strip that is based on a simple formula: the Gaza Strip's reconstruction in exchange for demilitarization. Hamas will refuse. That will not change the opinion of the professional Israel-haters. But it will change something for many other people. We should not have waited for Nasrallah's speech to learn that there is a powerful weapon working against Israel. But we should pay attention to his statement to prompt us to wake up and address the matter. Because if we wait until the next clash, it is going to be too late.**