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Israel and Middle East News Update

Friday, July 16

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News Excerpts

July 16, 2021

Al-Monitor

Arab-Israeli Woman Appointed to Knesset Security Panel

Ibtisam Mara'ana of the Labor Party was a controversial figure even before she was sworn into the Knesset. Parties on the right wanted to disqualify her, claiming that she supports terrorism, citing comments she once made on social media. The matter was brought before the Supreme Court, which ruled that Mara'ana was eligible to serve in the Knesset. Mara'ana became a member of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, the most prestigious of all the Knesset committees. This committee has always been considered a stronghold of the Israel's security hawks. Traditionally, its members include former defense ministers and chiefs of staff. It was only in the last few years that women and Arabs were even appointed to the committee. The only Arab who ever served on the committee was current Minister of Regional Cooperation Issawi Freij. [Dig Deeper "Joint List Said Ready to Consider Helping Government Pass Budget" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

I24 News

Israel Registers 855 New Daily COVID-19 Cases

Israel recorded 855 new COVID-19 cases, according to Health Ministry data, marking the fourth consecutive day where the number of new infections has exceeded 750 as the country struggles to contain an outbreak of the highly contagious delta variant despite its record-setting vaccine rollout. A total of 52 patients were listed as seriously ill with 18 people in critical condition and 17 on respirators. The positive test rate stood at 1.52% out of more than 56,000 tests administered over the previous 24-hour period. The number of fatalities in Israel since the pandemic began in early 2020 stood at 6,443. Prime Minister Naftali [Bennett](#) said that the Israeli public can prevent another lockdown by following the health restrictions currently in place. [Dig Deeper "Israel 'Could' Go Under Lockdown for September Holidays, Health Chief Says" \(I24 News\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

COGAT Announces Eid Al-Adha Measures for Palestinians

The IDF's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) announced a list of measures to be taken in the West Bank, ahead of Eid al-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice) celebrations. The new measures will come into effect on Sunday following approval by Defense Minister Benny Gantz. Palestinian families residing in the West Bank will be allowed to make visits inside Israel, without age restrictions. In addition, married men over 50 and women over 40 will be able to pray at Temple Mount/Haram Al-Sharif. In light of the recent COVID outbreak of the delta variant in Israel, and in accordance, permits will be issued to vaccinated or recovering Palestinian residents who test negative for coronavirus. In 2019, Israel Police arrested 2 Palestinian youths after clashes with Israelis at Temple Mount before Eid al-Adha, prompting COGAT to make measures to preserve the security of both Palestinians and Israelis, while not infringing on the Palestinians' right to worship during their sacrifice festival.

Israel Arrests Dozens of Hamas-Linked Students in WB

Israel says it arrested dozens of Palestinian students in the occupied West Bank who are linked to the Hamas militant group. The military said that those arrested belong to a Hamas student group at Birzeit University and were “directly involved in terror activities, including money transfers, incitement and the organization of Hamas activities.” The statement provided no evidence to back up the claims. Hamas, which rules Gaza, has an armed wing as well as a political organization, charities and student groups. Israel and Western countries consider Hamas a terrorist group because it has carried out scores of deadly attacks against Israelis over the years. Hamas condemned the arrest of the students, who it says were paying a solidarity visit to the demolished home of a Palestinian who allegedly killed an Israeli and wounded two others in a drive-by shooting in May. He was arrested days after the attack. [Dig Deeper “IDF Forces Arrest Dozens of Terror Suspects Near Ramallah Overnight” \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

Bennett Meets with Family of Fallen Soldier Held by Hamas

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett met with the parents of Israeli soldier Hadar Goldin, whose body is being held by the Gaza-ruling Hamas terror group. According to the Prime Minister’s Office, Bennett told Simcha and Leah Goldin that he will maintain regular contact with them. Also attending the meeting were outgoing National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat, Israel’s hostage coordinator Yaron Bloom and the prime minister’s military secretary, Brig. Gen. Avi Bluth. The Goldin family has been battling for the return of his body since he was killed during the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict. Leah accompanied then-president Reuven Rivlin on his farewell tour to the US last month to lobby the UN for his return. Following the meeting with Bennett, the Goldin family said in a statement that they had called on the prime minister “not to repeat the mistakes of the past, and to make the return of the soldiers and civilians a precondition for everything in the Gaza Strip.” [Dig Deeper “Leah Goldin to Bennett: No Qatari Cash for Gaza Unless Our Sons Are Freed” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

US Point Person: PA Facing Dangerous Economic Crisis

The State Department’s point person on Israel-Palestine warned Israeli officials during his talks in Jerusalem this week that the Palestinian Authority (PA) is facing dangerous economic and political crises, according to Israeli officials. The PA is going through a deep legitimacy crisis after the postponement of the parliamentary elections and the death of a political activist in the custody of Palestinian security forces. The situation has been exacerbated by a financial crisis largely driven by the coronavirus pandemic. Hady Amr, the deputy assistant secretary of state for Israeli-Palestinian affairs meeting with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas’s aides in Ramallah before meeting Israeli officials in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. According to Israeli officials, Amr proposed several measures the Israeli government can take to help the Palestinian economy and the PA’s budget, and ultimately strengthen its standing in the occupied West Bank. [Dig Deeper “Palestinians Shaken but Steadfast as PA Suppresses Dissent” \(Associated Press\)](#)

China Says Will Step Up Involvement in Mideast Mediation

China plans to step up its involvement in mediation efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said. In the past, China had already attempted to work as a mediator between Israel and Palestinians, offering itself as an alternative to the United States. “The past and the present have proved time and again that the two-state solution is the only viable way to resolve the Palestinian question as it represents international consensus, fairness and justice,” Wang said on Zoom during a virtual Palestinian-Israeli Peace Symposium convened by the Chinese Foreign Ministry. Also at the conference, PA Social Affairs Minister Ahmed Majdalani said that the PA aimed to “implement a set of measures to build confidence between peoples, improve the humanitarian situation and open a real window for negotiations to end the conflict.” China is one of five permanent members of the UN Security Council, where it frequently plays its veto card to block motions against its allies. After voicing its support for the Gaza Strip-based Hamas during the latest conflagration of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict earlier this year, China was accused of anti-Israeli bias.

Times of Israel

Hariri Steps Down After Months of Deadlock

Lebanon’s Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri stepped down citing “key differences” with the president after nine months of political wrangling that failed to put together a government for the crisis-ridden country. The development is likely to plunge Lebanon further into chaos and uncertainty amid an unprecedented economic breakdown — and also dim prospects for a recovery package from the International Monetary Fund. “It is clear that we will not be able to agree with the president,” Hariri said after a 20-minute meeting with President Michel Aoun. “I have excused myself from forming the government. May God help the country.” After the news broke, protesters — mostly Hariri’s supporters — blocked roads and set fire to tires in several parts of Beirut, decrying the deepening crisis. Troops deployed to break up a protest at the edge of Beirut, firing in the air and using armored vehicles to open roads. Protesters pelted the soldiers with stones. The national currency, in free fall since the crisis erupted in late 2019, plunged to a new low, selling for more than 20,000 to the dollar on the black market. The Lebanese pound, pegged to the dollar for 30 years, has lost more than 90% of its value. [Dig Deeper “Lebanon Spins Further Into Crisis as Hariri Abandons Bid to Form Government” \(Reuters\)](#)

The Nuclear Archive

By Alon Ben David

- In an excoriating article, an article from which it was hard to pick out the true sentences, MK Netanyahu claimed this week, “In one month, the new government poked holes in the iron wall that was built for 12 years against Iran.” Any attempt to compare the actions of the person who reigned here for 12 years to a government that has not yet served 40 days is utterly unwarranted. It is also obvious that Iran’s nuclear program did not suddenly take a leap forward a month ago, when the new government was sworn in. We can only examine the claims of the former prime minister by examining what he did and by asking: in what state was the Iranian nuclear program when Netanyahu became prime minister, and how far has it come during the 12 years of his tenure? The short answer is that after five Netanyahu governments, the Iranian nuclear program has reached a more threatening point than ever before, and that the options that Israel could have taken against it 12 years ago have since shrunk. The media gives a lot of attention to the question “how far is Iran from a bomb,” and the answer to this, like in most things in life, is complex. To produce a nuclear bomb, you need two things: a sufficient quantity of fissile material (about 20 kilograms of enriched uranium to a level of over 90%), and the ability to turn this material into a nuclear device. You also, of course, need a launching means (missiles), but Iran developed those a long time ago.
- As far as is known, the group that worked on building the Iranian device, the “weapons group,” stopped meeting in 2003, and its activity has not been resumed on a regular basis, only with tests from time to time. Intelligence services have to assume that it could well be continuing to work secretly, but there is no evidence of this. The assessments are that it will take Iran between a year and a half to two years from the moment that the group resumes working to when it has the ability to produce a first nuclear bomb. That is the reason that the focus at the moment is on the first bottleneck that Iran will have to overcome: producing a sufficient quantity of fissile material to a military-grade level. In 2009, when Ehud Olmert passed the premiership to Netanyahu, Iran already had an ambitious nuclear program, but it was in the initial stages. About 1,000 relatively slow centrifuges spun in Iran and enriched uranium to a low level and in small quantities. Iran at that point was at least two years away from producing enough material for a first bomb.
- Nonetheless, Olmert invested huge sums in creating an Israeli military option against the Iranian nuclear facilities. It was reported that Israel took secret action to thwart the nuclear program by sabotaging equipment and installations and by assassinating scientists. Incidentally, the man who was one of the leading technology people in the Mossad when the Stuxnet virus was planted into the centrifuges in Iran, was appointed this week to be the Bennett government’s national security adviser. Netanyahu continued with what Olmert had started, both in covert operations and in strengthening the IDF’s military option against Iran. Between 2010-2012, he even toyed with the idea of employing this option, but ultimately did not have the daring to do so.

- In 2012, it was learned that the US administration was holding secret negotiations with Iran on a nuclear agreement in Oman, and Obama put the handbrakes on Netanyahu and ordered him to cease covert operations and stop preparations for a military strike. Netanyahu, who today scoffs at the Bennett government's coordination with the US, bowed his head and obeyed. The IDF stopped training for a strike and the Mossad shelved the operations that it had in the pipeline. In the absence of any disturbance from Israel, Iran utilized the three years of negotiations with the US to move ahead rapidly with its nuclear program. By 2015, it had installed more than 15,000 centrifuges and stockpiled more than eight tons of enriched uranium—a quantity sufficient for a dozen nuclear bombs. Netanyahu did not try to get in the way or to disrupt this. But he talked, a lot. He did not talk to the US administration and did not try and influence the emerging agreement, but rather adopted a belligerent approach of fighting President Obama through Congress. He gave a heartrending speech to a joint session that was accurate and true, and which was very pleasing to Israeli ears, but did not have the desired result in the US. The Obama administration was estranged from Netanyahu as a result of the speech and was quick to sign a bad agreement with Iran.
- Bad as it was, the agreement limited the number of centrifuges that Iran could operate and the quantity of uranium that it could stockpile. To this day, the hole-filled nuclear agreement and the lacunae in it were the single significant thing that set Iran's nuclear program back. Since 2009, the only three years in which Iran once again became farther from a bomb were the years of the 2015-2018 nuclear agreement. Trump's election was Netanyahu's opportunity to fix matters. The brilliant operation of stealing Iran's nuclear archive and exposing Iran's lies paved the way for Trump to withdraw from the JCPOA and to impose a policy of crippling sanctions that ruined the Iranian economy. But Trump was not willing to take the extra step and attack the Iranians. It could be that we got Trump too early. Had he been elected five years from now, with a nuclear Iran—perhaps it would have been possible to persuade him to attack. Since 2018, and despite the sanctions, Iran surged ahead with its nuclear program.
- It began to install more advanced centrifuges, it built a metallurgy plant vital to producing a bomb, and stockpiled three tons of fissile material, including highly enriched material to a level of 60%. According to foreign sources, Israel during that time took steps to sabotage the Iranian capability. Its enriched uranium plant was badly damaged in a terrorist attack, as was its plant for building centrifuges. In Netanyahu's final year in office Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, the father of the Iranian nuclear program, was also assassinated, leaving behind a vacuum that the Iranians are having trouble filling. The latest attack, on a plant to build centrifuge blades, took place during Bennett's tenure. As in the past, this sequence of events was only partially successful. They caused delays and disruptions, but did not stop the Iranian dash. When Bennett assumed office, he inherited from Netanyahu an Iran that can, within three months, produce material for a first bomb. Netanyahu also bequeathed him the military option that has been neglected for the last nine years and must now be rebuilt. But Bennett brings to the job something new: an attentive ear in Washington. It is not certain that he will be able to persuade the Americans to reach a better agreement, but at least they talk to him.

- **Neither is it certain that the Iranians have any interest in such an agreement, but if the Iranians choose not to return to the agreement and to surge ahead to a bomb—Israel must have a channel of dialogue with Washington. Without the open enmity that Netanyahu elicited in the Democratic administration, an open dialogue with them will also give Israel greater operational freedom. Israel’s military option against Iran was never good and absolute. Israel can hit Iran’s nuclear facilities (at the cost of a major war), but that will only delay the Iranians, not stop them. That said, if all other options have been exhausted and the Israeli prime minister realizes that this is the only thing separating the ayatollahs from a nuclear bomb—no matter who the prime minister is at the time—they will make the same decision.**

“Uriel, That’s Us”

By Ben Caspit

- The moment that MK Uriel Busso (Shas) tweeted the top headline from Yedioth Ahronoth one morning this week [Tuesday, July 13] was amusing to the point of tears, ludicrous to the point of awe, and reflected better than anything else what we have had for the past decade. Busso, a diligent parliamentarian (really), photographed this sensational headline: “Chances of Recovering from Cancer are Lower in Periphery.” He added his own erudite commentary above the headline: “Tel Aviv-Raanana government.” Word to the wise. The speedy tweeter deleted it a few minutes later. I assume that someone (certainly his parliamentary aide) approached him, put a heavy hand on his shoulder and told him, “Uriel, that’s us.”
- Meaning: this awful situation, where the odds of recovering from cancer in the periphery are lower than in central Israel and the lifespan in the periphery is quite a few years lower than in central Israel, is the result of more than a decade of prolonged neglect. Even Dudi Amsalem couldn’t blame this terrible statistic on a government that was formed a month ago. That isn’t the fault of the Tel Aviv-Raanana government, but the Safsufa-Caesarea government. Naively, I thought that this crazy tweet had set the record for ludicrousness this week, but the next day came the formative article by Opposition Chairman and mismanaging editor of Israel Hayom Binyamin Netanyahu, which was spread out over the entire front page of the Bibi-freebie, to the glory of Israel. “The Iranians are Racing to a Nuclear Bomb,” the man from Caesarea thundered, “and the Bennett-Lapid Government is Silent.”
- The proper way to respond this article is to roar with laughter, but suddenly I remembered that the Iranian bomb, which is closer than ever, is liable to blow up first. Netanyahu has to own this issue in its entirety too. He is the sole architect of our decisive failure vis-à-vis Iran. He was the navigator who led us into the dead end that Bennett and Lapid are now trying to find a way out of. After all that, he doesn’t have a shred of shame before sitting down to blame the government for “silence.” For the Bibi-ists’ information: you don’t stop a nuclear bomb or a nuclear program with talk, but with action. Two leaders took this step before: Menachem Begin, who in 1981 destroyed the Iraqi reactor that Saddam Hussein had built, and Ehud Olmert, who in 2007 destroyed the Syrian nuclear reactor that Bashar Assad had built. Netanyahu? He mostly gave speeches, cautioned, warned, threatened, talked, babbled, ran around the world, pulled out folders and AV presentations, and after a dozen years of wide-ranging activity of this kind, left his successors an Iran that is on the verge of becoming a nuclear threshold state. It might be that at the time, he was right to chicken out a decade ago, when he hesitated, deliberated, and ultimately shirked his duty to deliver a military blow to the Iranian nuclear infrastructure. History will be the judge of that. His truly catastrophic and dramatic gamble transpired later, from 2015-2016. First, he made that miserable visit to Congress, over the head of President Obama, when there was no chance of stopping the JCPOA.

- He was warned, and he flouted those warnings. He preferred to score points two weeks before the election against Herzog rather than taking action to benefit Israel's national interest (to understand reality, wait patiently for Trump, and in the meanwhile not to burn bridges with the Democrats). But the pinnacle came immediately after Trump moved into the White House. Netanyahu took advantage of his great influence and persuaded Trump to withdraw from the nuclear agreement. He was warned about this too, but he ignored the warnings. He preferred short-term gains over long-term security interests. He became addicted to posing as the oracle from Jerusalem, the one who rebukes in public, the global educator and the universal guide. In the meantime, he disconnected from the mothership. Like many other journalists, I met with quite a few senior security establishment officials those days and saw embarrassment. Almost no one burst out dancing the hora when the Americans resoundingly quit the agreement. The implications were clear: it would enable Iran to get closer to a nuclear bomb openly and dramatically, without having to pay a significant price.
- I asked many senior intelligence and military officials: why are you worried? After all, the Americans are with us, Trump is in synch with Bibi, they withdrew from the agreement, the sanctions have been reinstated with a vengeance, everything's good, isn't it? The people sitting across from me stammered. "Who said that Trump will be here for good?" asked one of them. "What will happen if Trump loses interest later and won't launch a military strike on the Iranian nuclear program?" said another. "The nuclear agreement is problematic," mused yet another, "but it set Iran back and suspended it two years away from the bomb. It gave us twelve years of quiet that could be capitalized on for strategically important matters. Nobody knows what will happen the moment the Americans pull out of it and the Iranians are no longer bound by it. What will we do if they start moving rapidly towards a bomb, the Europeans yawn, and the Americans exercise restraint? What happens then? Has anybody thought about that?"
- The answer is yes, there were people who thought about that. Unfortunately, Netanyahu is not one of them. He thought mostly about himself and believed the fairy tales that he sold to his people. This is the exact situation that we are in right now. It is entirely Netanyahu's doing. The pied piper led us and the entire world to the current situation: Iran is closer to obtaining nuclear weapons than ever, has no obligations whatsoever, and faces no significant force to try to stop it. Apart from us, of course. Here we get to the story that's really severe. First, let's skip back twelve years in time, to March 2009. Netanyahu has won the election (despite receiving one seat less than Tzipi Livni's Kadima Party) and has received the mandate to form a government. Olmert authorized him to start the transition work weeks before the work of forming the government was finished. Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi invited him to his bureau in the Kirya and opened the doors of the most secret warehouse in the world, where Israel's well-funded and shockingly expensive unique military option for an assault on Iran's military nuclear infrastructure was being formulated. Netanyahu's eyes got as wide as a junkie's after taking a double hit. He called home, engaged in an act of soul-searching (that is, he postponed dinner with the Missus), and stayed there for hours.

- He came back the next day. He was introduced to the painstaking creative work that our best and brightest had done in order to have a possibility to give Israel a more or less effective way to hit the distant and fortified Iranian nuclear infrastructure. It cost billions, but it was worth its weight in gold. Fast forward twelve years. Naftali Bennett moves into the Prime Minister's Bureau. No, he hasn't been authorized to start the transition process earlier, as Netanyahu was before. The truth is that there was no transition work at all. Bennett landed straight into a problematic, not to mention frightening, situation. When he asked the directors of the branches of the security establishment about Israel's military option against Iran, they shrugged. When he sought clarification, the scandal was revealed: ever since he convinced Trump to quit the nuclear agreement, Netanyahu had not bothered to make sure that Israel had a military option in case his thesis collapsed, Trump vanished, and Iran pressed ahead to the bomb.
- For the past three years the security establishment has been pleading for funding to resume and tailor the now obsolete and irrelevant military option, but Netanyahu dithered. He had time. He rested on his artificial laurels. Gabi Ashkenazi, back as chairman of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, bombarded him with letters. Chiefs of staff, directors of the IDF Intelligence Branch, other senior officials, ministers—who didn't contact him? They all realized that Israel had to prepare, but Netanyahu ignored them. The fact is that the issue was not funded and preparations were not executed. Someone either fell asleep on his watch or was too busy looking out for himself. As of now, the worst of all is happening: Iran has the legitimacy to violate the agreement, and it is surging ahead. It has a huge quantity of uranium that has been enriched to an almost-military grade (60%), it is bringing the next generation of centrifuges into service, and it is nearing the goal. It has taken serious blows from unnamed figures (yes, including under the Bennett-Lapid government), but it is a gigantic country with stable infrastructure, a knowledge base, and numerous resources.
- It is a stone's throw from the bomb. Now we are completely dependent on the Americans, and there is a Democratic administration in the White House. For those who forgot: the Democrats are the ones who Bibi humiliated, belittled, slandered and abused. They have enjoyed seeing him suffer. They know that Bennett is more right-wing and radical than he is, but they take pleasure in Bibi's defeat. He came by this with great skill. We are approaching the situation that Meir Dagan once called "having the sword pressed to our throats," a situation in which there is no alternative to the use of force. The problem is that even Israel's force isn't what it used to be. Only God knows how he dared to write an article in which he accused the Bennett government of being silent. Chutzpah was never a rare commodity in his toolbox. Prime Minister Bennett, faced with these groundless accusations, was forced, almost coerced into saying from the Knesset podium, "Never before in the State of Israel was there someone who talked so much and did so little on the Iranian issue." His bureau tried not to launch a campaign of briefings but was not always successful. "Bibi would be better off staying quiet," said one of the prime minister's aides, "we mustn't get caught up in his irresponsibility, but if he thinks that he can run an Iranian campaign against us, he's wrong. Three weeks after this government took office, after his entire doctrine on the Iranian issue crashed, after he did not heed

the warnings that the Iranians would enrich uranium like crazy after the US withdrew from the nuclear agreement, he yet dares to continue to jabber and boast?"