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Israel and Middle East News Update

Monday, July 19

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News Excerpts

July 19, 2021

Associated Press

Hundreds of Jews Visit Contested Holy Site in Jerusalem

Hundreds of Jewish pilgrims visited a contested Jerusalem holy site under heavy police guard, shortly after Muslim worshippers briefly clashed with Israeli security forces at the flashpoint shrine. No injuries were reported, but the incident again raised tensions at the hilltop compound revered by Jews and Muslims. Heavy clashes at the site earlier this year helped spark an 11-day war between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Jews revere the site as the Temple Mount, where the biblical Temples once stood. It is the holiest site in Judaism. Today, it is home to the Al Aqsa Mosque, the third-holiest site in Islam. The Jews were visiting to mark Tisha B'Av, a day of mourning and repentance when Jews reflect on the destruction of the First and Second Temples. Prime Minister Naftali [Bennett](#) praised police for their handling of the visit and vowed to protect “freedom of worship” for Jews and Muslims at the site. [Dig Deeper “Jordan, Egypt, Turkey All Condemn Jewish Visits to Temple Mount on Tisha B'Av” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Times of Israel

Israel Quietly Letting Jews Pray on Temple Mount

Israel has quietly started allowing Jewish prayers on the Temple Mount in recent months, in what would appear to be a major change to the status quo that has existed at the holy site since the Israel captured the Old City of Jerusalem from Jordan during 1967's Six Day War, according to a Channel 12 report. Channel 12's religious affairs reporter Yair Cherki filmed prayers at the site in recent days, as policemen — who in the past would eject any person suspected of prayer, and sometimes kicked people out for merely citing a biblical verse while speaking — passively looked on. The worshipers gather without prayer books, tefillin or any other symbols of prayer that could draw unwanted attention from Muslims at the compound that houses the Al-Aqsa Mosque. But pray they do, with the cops turning a blind eye. [Dig Deeper “Bennett Backpedals After Appearing to Say Jews Free to Pray on Temple Mount” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ynet News

Hundreds Cross Temple Mount Bridge Despite Warnings

Despite an immediate danger of collapse, over 1,600 people have ascended to the Temple Mount using an unstable wooden bridge as the Jewish people mark Tisha B'Av. Notwithstanding warnings, Prime Minister Bennett ordered to keep allowing worshipers access to the Temple Mount using the Mughrabi Bridge — a wooden walkway connecting the Western Wall Plaza with the Mughrabi Gate of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Jerusalem Municipality and Israel Police cite the site's sensitive political status as the reason behind the delays and claim it is up to the government whether to greenlight the construction of the bridge. Dozens of Jewish worshipers use the structure daily as the Mughrabi Gate is the only gate to the Temple Mount that the site's Muslim authority allows non-Muslims to use for visiting the Temple Mount complex. The bridge is the only way to reach the gate.

Lapid to Visit Morocco as Countries Strengthen Ties

Foreign Minister Yair Lapid is planning to travel to Morocco in August to inaugurate the new Israeli diplomatic mission. Lapid would be the first Israeli minister to visit Morocco since the nations re-established diplomatic relations as part of a three-way deal with the United States, in which the Trump administration recognized Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara. The Moroccans stopped short of fully normalizing diplomatic relations with Israel when the deal was signed in December, preferring instead to mutually open diplomatic liaison offices in lieu of embassies — and potentially retaining bargaining chips should the next administration (Biden's) consider rolling back the Western Sahara decision. Morocco plans to conclude its normalization process by turning its diplomatic liaison office in Tel Aviv into an official embassy. According to Israeli officials, Morocco and Israel are negotiating the possibility of announcing the upgrade of the diplomatic offices to full embassies during Lapid's visit.

IDF Razes 50 Palestinian Structures During Amr's Visit

The IDF razed over 50 illegal West Bank Palestinian structures last week, while US envoy Hady Amr was visiting Israel and the Palestinian territories. The US and the international community have persistently spoken out against such demolitions, of which 400 have taken place this year, according to United Nations data. That's more than the 393 structures razed in 2019. If the pace continues it is likely that more illegal Palestinian structures will be demolished this year than the 664 that were razed last year. The Israeli Right has argued that the illegal Palestinian construction is part of a deliberate plan by the Palestinian Authority (PA) to seize control of Area C to prevent the application of Israeli sovereignty over that territory. The US and Israel have clashed in recent weeks over Israel's policy of demolishing the family home of Palestinians indicted for or found guilty of terror attacks in which Israelis are killed. [Dig Deeper "Lapid Requests Delay In Contentious Demolition of West Bank Bedouin Village" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Family: Palestinian Authority Covering Up Critic's Death

The family of a political activist Nizar Banat who died in the custody of Palestinian security forces last month accused the PA of trying to cover up his death. Relatives of Banat said they still have not received a document with an official cause of death and said the PA has made efforts to settle the matter out of court. Banat was an outspoken critic of the PA who called on Western nations to stop providing aid to the PA due to human rights violations and growing authoritarianism. In a series of posts and live videos on Facebook, Banat had criticized the authority's close security coordination with Israel, seen by many Palestinians as betrayal, and its corruption. He also lashed out at President Mahmoud Abbas in April for calling off what would have been the first Palestinian elections in 15 years. Banat was a candidate on an opposition slate. The PA, seen as a crucial partner of the US and other Western countries, has formed an investigative committee into Banat's death. [Dig Deeper "Palestinian-Jordanian Crisis Erupts Ahead of Abdullah-Biden Meeting" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Microsoft: Israeli Company's Malware Used to Hack Activists

Microsoft says it disrupted an Israeli private company's unique malware that hackers in other countries used to spy on political dissidents and rights campaigners. After receiving a tip from researchers at Citizen Lab, a watchdog organization at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs, Microsoft began investigating malware from a group it dubbed "Sourgum." Sourgum's malware appeared to use a chain of browser and Windows exploits, including zero-day exploits, the company said. The hackers sent the browser exploits to targets with single-use URLs on messaging applications such as WhatsApp. Citizen Lab has assessed with high confidence that the actor Microsoft is calling Sourgum is an Israeli company that goes by the name Candiru. According to the watchdog, Candiru sells spyware that can infect and monitor a range of devices and platforms, including Microsoft's Windows operating system. Its customers are exclusively foreign governments, Citizen Lab said. Candiru has reportedly previously sold to government agencies in Uzbekistan, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Microsoft and Citizen Lab say the malware was used in "precision attacks" targeting more than 100 people worldwide, including politicians, human rights activists, journalists, academics, embassy workers and political dissidents. Roughly half of the victims identified were located in the Palestinian territories, with the remaining targets in Israel, Iran, Lebanon, Yemen, Spain's Catalonia region, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Armenia and Singapore. [Dig Deeper "Israel Pushed Spyware Firms to Work With Saudis Despite Khashoggi Murder" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

I24 News

UAE, Saudi Arabia Compromise on Oil Production Levels

The world's leading oil producers agreed to continue to modestly boost output from August, after the UAE blocked a deal earlier this month. An OPEC+ meeting agreed to raise output by 400,000 barrels per day each month from August to help fuel a global economic recovery as the pandemic eases, the Vienna-based group said in a press statement. The grouping will "assess market developments" in December, it said. The deal also extends a deadline on capping output from April 2022 to the end of 2022. Days of negotiations of OPEC+ members to continue to further ease production cuts became deadlocked early this month, exposing a row between the world's largest oil exporter Saudi Arabia and brash neighbor the UAE. Since May, the 23-member grouping, which also includes Russia, has raised oil output bit by bit, after slashing it more than a year ago when the coronavirus pandemic crushed demand. In a rare challenge to OPEC leader Saudi Arabia, the UAE slammed the proposed deal earlier this month as "unjust," leading to a stalemate. OPEC+ agreed to adjust output quotas next May for the UAE and several other countries, meaning their actual cuts will be less. Once closely aligned on foreign policy, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have diverged in recent years as the two countries strategic objectives have increasingly differed, as was shown recently with the OPEC+ negotiations. [Dig Deeper "Saudi Commentators Go Public in Criticizing UAE Role in Yemen" \(Reuters\)](#)

Sharp Rise in IDF Enlistment Among Young Muslim Men

By Tal Lev Ram

- In the aftermath of Operation Guardian of the Walls and the violent riots that erupted in mixed cities, the IDF has presented encouraging numbers that indicate a sharp rise in the number of Muslim men who choose to enlist in the IDF. According to the new data, 606 Arab Muslim citizens enlisted in 2020, compared to 489 who enlisted in 2019 and 436 who enlisted in 2018. The number of soldiers to enlist in the Bedouin reconnaissance unit doubled in the space of two years, from 84 in 2018 to 171 in 2020. In 2017 only 45 people enlisted. Thanks to the surge in enlistment, the IDF now has two platoons in basic training every time, as opposed to just one. In the course of Operation Guardian of the Walls, 29 Muslim soldiers asked to be discharged from military service in response to intense pressure at home. Eighteen of them ultimately decided to remain in uniform and to continue to serve after discussing the matter with their commanders. The other 11 were discharged from service, as requested. The prevailing assessment within the IDF is that the upward trend in Muslim enlistment into the IDF will continue—notwithstanding the strains produced by Operation Guardian of the Walls and the violent riots that erupted in mixed cities and in cities, towns and villages across Israel. The IDF counts its 2020 enlistment numbers from July 2019 through June 2020. According to preliminary data currently in hand, no change in the enlistment numbers has been recorded thus far [in the 2021 numbers]. IDF officials said that definitive numbers would only become available in the middle of next year. The number of Muslim soldiers who terminated their service prematurely dropped in 2020 by 7%, down from 30% in 2019 to 23% in 2020. The number of Muslim soldiers who went AWOL dropped by 10% this past year as well.
- IDF officials said that all of the data attest to higher motivation to enlist and to serve in the army. IDF officials said they believe that the rising enlistment rate among Muslim citizens (primarily Bedouins) stems primarily from the public information campaign that was mounted to raise the enlistment rate, and the personal invitation that was issued to 4,000 young Muslim men to enlist. Among them, 1,200 expressed an interest in enlisting and made contact with the army, out of which 250 ultimately enlisted. The IDF and the Defense Ministry intend to launch a similar campaign this September, just on a much larger scale. More than 10,000 prospective candidates for military service will be sent an invitation to serve, instead of a first call-up order. That outreach effort will be complemented by a public information campaign that will also involve Bedouin IDF reservists. Roughly 75% of all Bedouins who enlist for IDF service live in northern Israel, where enlistment into the IDF has been higher traditionally. Enlistment rates have been lower in southern Israel as a result of ongoing tensions between the state authorities and the Bedouin population, rampant crime, the political ascendancy of radical Islamic groups and a range of other factors. Military officials now want to change that trend, and said they expected to be able to enlist several hundred Bedouin soldiers from southern Israel, which will help bolster their sense of belonging to Israel, as well as their families' sense of belonging.

“No Free Lunches”

By Shlomo Shamir

- Without having any impressive achievements in the peace process yet, without having launched any original initiatives, without having led to any substantial diplomatic developments, Israel's new government has come to be perceived by ambassadors and senior diplomat in the UN and among veteran commentators in Washington as a positive and dramatic change. And not just in political terms. In off-the-record conversations, political officials in New York and Washington, including some who are not known to be fans of Israel, have been talking about Israel's new government in a palpable effort to sound complimentary. The international community is still unfamiliar with Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid. Ambassadors and veteran diplomats in the delegations of key Western countries are not exactly well- acquainted with the outcome of votes in the Knesset, nor do they really understand what the results mean about the balance of votes between the coalition and the opposition.
- The New York Times recently published a report with the headline “Israel's New Government Fails to Extend Contentious Citizenship Law,” but the report did not draw special attention. “I'm not interested in that, nor do I particularly care about it,” said the deputy head of a delegation of a major Western country to the UN. That person, who is known to be prominently pro-Israel, nearly went out of his way to talk about the pro-change government. “What matters to me and my colleagues is that Israel has a new political leadership, which represents a real difference compared with recent years,” he said. Similar comments were uttered in almost every conversation, in every reference to Israel's new government.
- Unlike diplomats, the commentators in Washington have taken an increased interest in news from Israel and are engaged in analyses of the results of votes in the Knesset for the future of the coalition. Some of them mentioned Mansour Abbas. They say that the presence of a devout Arab Muslim in the coalition is proof of a positive and highly meaningful change in Israeli politics. “Now it's hard to accuse the government in Jerusalem of fostering apartheid,” said an esteemed longtime commentator in Washington. What Bennett and Lapid have to remember is that there are no free lunches. The continuation of the initial positive status that the pro-change government received in the international arena will need development in the field of foreign policy. The substantial improvement in ties with the White House is remarkable and commendable, but it isn't enough. In his scheduled visit to the White House, Bennett will receive a warm welcome, but officials in Washington expect a proposal, a creative initiative that will justify the expectation that has emerged around the new Israeli government. From the international community's standpoint, the first main issue that the government must address is breaking the ongoing stagnation and paralysis in Israel's ties—to be precise, the lack of ties—with the Palestinian Authority. Ambassadors and senior diplomats in the UN have remarked that an earnest Israeli initiative to resume dialogue with the Palestinians would contribute greatly to strengthening and stabilizing the government's image.

- **“The Netanyahu government made sure that the stagnation in ties with the Palestinian Authority would continue and even grow worse,” said a senior member of a Western country’s delegation at UN Headquarters in New York. “Netanyahu’s big mistake was that he believed that the peace agreements with some of the Persian Gulf countries would make the paralysis in ties with the Palestinian Authority be forgotten and go away. It doesn’t work that way. The Palestinian problem has not disappeared from the international agenda, and especially not from the UN’s priorities.” In off-the-record conversations, diplomats have confirmed the status of the PA, which they described as “severely degraded,” and the image of PA President Mahmoud Abbas is also at a severe low. That said, senior international diplomats maintain that the crisis in which the PA is in and the problem of Mahmoud Abbas’s performance actually constitute a good reason and motive for an Israeli move. “Such an initiative will cast the new government as a positive diplomatic actor, and not just in the regional sense,” said the deputy head of a Western country’s delegation to the UN. “The White House will like a bold Israeli peace move too.”**
- **High-ranking members of the Jewish community of New York feel less obliged to exercise the requisite restraint of UN diplomats. It has been nearly a month since the government was formed, and the satisfaction with its existence has already turned to delight. Some of them who maintain and foster close ties with Israeli politicians and party chairs have been speaking enthusiastically about what they call “the dramatic political shift in Jerusalem.” The way they see it, the important thing that happened was “that Netanyahu isn’t prime minister anymore.” It’s no secret that the large and overwhelming majority of the American Jewish community dislikes Netanyahu. It is a liberal majority, which loathes Donald Trump, and was incapable of comprehending, let alone accepting, the friendship on display between Trump and Netanyahu. “That friendship was something awful from our perspective,” said Eric Yoffie, who served for many years as president of the Union for Reform Judaism. “Now we don’t have Trump in Washington or Netanyahu in Jerusalem.**
- **We couldn’t ask for more than that.” The new coalition has a Reform rabbi, MK Gilad Kariv, for the first time. This fact has been flattering to the leadership of the Reform movement, but the leaders of non-Orthodox groups, which form a majority of the American Jewish community, are currently waiting for results on the ground. For most of the American Jewish community, the first test of the pro-change government will be access for Reform and Conservative Jews to the Western Wall. Now they are waiting for the Western Wall arrangement, which was approved by the cabinet five years ago but was thwarted in the implementation stage by Netanyahu, to be carried out in practice.**