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## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, July 21*

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# News Excerpts

July 21, 2021

## Jerusalem Post

### **Gantz: Defense Ministry Looking Into NSO Investigation**

The Defense Ministry is studying the investigation into NSO Group, Defense Minister Benny [Gantz](#) said after it was revealed that the Israeli cyber company has been selling spyware to foreign governments to target journalists and activists. “We are aware of recent publications regarding the use of systems developed by certain Israeli cyber companies,” Gantz said at Tel Aviv University. The Pegasus Project revealed that the spyware sold by NSO (Pegasus) had been identified on the phones of individuals targeted by the governments of Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Mexico, [Morocco](#), [Rwanda](#), Saudi Arabia, [Hungary](#), [India](#), the UAE and more. The investigation was carried out by 17 media organizations and led by the Paris-based journalism nonprofit Forbidden Stories and sponsored by Amnesty International. [Dig Deeper “Israel Forms Damage Control Team After NSO Pegasus Spyware Reports” \(Axios\)](#)

## Associated Press

### **Israel Vows to ‘Act Aggressively’ Against Ben & Jerry’s**

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett vowed to “act aggressively” against the decision by [Ben & Jerry’s](#) to stop selling its ice cream in Israeli-occupied territories, as Israel’s ambassador to the [US](#) urged dozens of [state governors](#) to punish the company under anti-boycott laws. The strong reaction reflected concerns in Israel that the ice cream maker’s decision could lead other companies to follow suit. It also appeared to set the stage for a protracted public relations and legal battle. Bennett’s office said he spoke with Alan Jope, chief executive of Ben & Jerry’s parent company Unilever, and raised concern about what he called a “clearly anti-Israel step.” He said the move would have “serious consequences, legal and otherwise,” and Israel “will act aggressively against all boycott actions directed against its citizens.” [Dig Deeper “US State Department Vows to Oppose BDS After Ben & Jerry’s Settlement Pullout” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## Times of Israel

### **PA Applauds Ben & Jerry’s for Ending Sales in Settlements**

The Palestinian Authority (PA) Foreign Ministry praised a decision by Ben & Jerry’s to end sales in West Bank settlements. “The company is respecting human rights and principles and morality, which reject working with the illegal, immoral imperial system that Israel is perpetuating in occupied Palestinian land,” the Ministry said in a statement. The Foreign Ministry said it further “calls on companies working, directly or indirectly, with the settlement system to take similar positions and immediately stop their dealings and business.” The ice cream giant announced that it will no longer distribute its products in the “Occupied Palestinian Territory.” It said the decision would take effect at the end of 2022, when its contract with the current Israeli distributor expires. It was not immediately clear if the boycott also applied to East Jerusalem. [Dig Deeper “US States’ Fully Baked Anti-Bds Laws Could Put the Freeze on Ben & Jerry’s” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## Settlement Activity Under Freeze Due to US Pressure

Prime Minister Bennett has apparently slowed the approval process for construction projects in Judea and Samaria (West Bank) because of American pressure, according to Israel Hayom. Bennett has refused to let the Civil Administration Zoning Committee schedule a routine meeting for the approval of construction plans. This has gone on for over a month, sources said. The committee, which is under the auspices of the Defense Ministry and is tasked with overseeing construction beyond the Green Line, normally reviews new construction plans every three months. These plans are essential for the overall development of the communities (settlements), as they pertain to access roads and big projects as well. The previous government, under then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, was supposed to set a date for a meeting of the committee, but Defense Minister Gantz prevented it from doing so, insisting only the new government should do so. [Dig Deeper "Far-Right Settler Youth Clash With Border Police at West Bank Outpost" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## King Abdullah Seeks to Revive Two-State Solution

[Jordan](#) is hoping that King Abdullah's meeting with President Joe Biden will pave the way for the kingdom to return to center stage in regional developments, particularly the Israeli-Arab conflict. Jordan is also hoping that the meeting will put an end to the talk about transforming the kingdom into a Palestinian state. The meeting comes after years of tension between Amman and Washington under the administration of former president Donald Trump. The tension reached its peak when Jordan rejected Trump's plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Jordan said it was not consulted about the plan, which, it claimed, endorsed former prime minister Netanyahu's plans for extending Israeli sovereignty to parts of the West Bank. According to the Jordanians, one of the goals of the Trump plan was to promote the "Jordan is Palestine" scheme, long promoted by a small group of far-right activists in Israel. The Jordanians breathed a sigh of relief when the Biden administration endorsed the two-state solution. [Dig Deeper "New Israeli Government on Mission to Rehabilitate Ties With Jordan" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

## 100K Worshipers Gather on Temple Mount/Haram Al-Sharif

More than 100,000 worshipers gathered on the Temple Mount/Haram Al-Sharif in Jerusalem's Old City to celebrate the start of the Muslim holiday of [Eid al-Adha](#), or Festival of Sacrifice. The major holiday on the Islamic calendar commemorates the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son Ishmael in obedience to God's command. The four-day festival observed around the world takes place at the end of the hajj [pilgrimage](#) to Mecca. The mass prayer at the al-Aqsa Mosque compound was in contrast to the scaled-down activities last year due to COVID-19 restrictions. During the gathering, the crowd began chanting "we shall sacrifice our lives for Al-Aqsa" with some attendees hanging a large banner in support of the Gaza-based terrorist group Hamas. Israeli Arab and Palestinian Muslims traditionally take to the streets in the evening to buy gifts, sweets and other items. [Dig Deeper "Muslims Mark Eid Al-Adha Holiday in Pandemic's Shadow" \(Associated Press\)](#)

## **IDF Strikes Lebanon in Response to Rocket Attack**

The Israeli military fired artillery shells into Lebanon after two rockets had been fired into northern Israel. Two rockets were launched into Western Galilee setting off sirens in northern cities and towns but causing no damage or injuries. One of the rockets was shot down by missile defenses and the other landed in an open area, the military said. The military said it believes that "Palestinian elements" in Lebanon are responsible for the rocket launch. "Two rockets were fired from Lebanon toward northern Israel. One of the rockets was intercepted by the Iron Dome Aerial Defense System & the second rocket fell in an open area inside Israel," the IDF said in a tweet. The attack occurred just hours before Prime Minister Bennett was due to visit the city of Ma'alot-Tarshiha in the Galilee. Visiting the town, Bennett said that "anyone who tries to harm us will pay a painful price in return." Defense Minister Gantz said in a statement that Lebanon was responsible for the rocket fire and that "Israel will act against any threat to its sovereignty and its citizens." Israel fought a 2006 war against Hezbollah, who have sway in southern Lebanon and advanced rockets. The border has been mostly quiet since then. [Dig Deeper "Syria Shot 7 of 8 Israeli Missiles, Russian Military Says" \(Associated Press\)](#)

## **Iran Security Council Rejects Nuclear Deal With US**

Iranian government spokesman Ali Rabiei said that a high-ranking committee has decided that an Iran-US agreement on the revival of the multilateral Iran nuclear deal, or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), has to be rejected. Rabiei said the decision was made despite an "agreement in principle" that has already been reached between Iran and American negotiators, who have been indirectly discussing their return to the JCPOA during six rounds of talks in Vienna. The other JCPOA parties present in the negotiations have been China, Russia, the UK, France and Germany. The spokesman said the committee within Iran's Supreme National Security Council dismissed the new deal on the grounds of "noncompliance" with a contentious parliamentary bill. The Iranian parliament, which is controlled by hard-liners opposing the Rouhani government, passed the bill in December. Despite expressing strong criticism against the bill, the Rouhani government ultimately swallowed the bitter pill and had to implement it. The legislation stipulated a jump in Iran's nuclear enrichment by 20% and later 60%, among other measures that also drew serious concern from the Western parties to the JCPOA. The same bill requires the government to maintain those breaches until the US verifiably removes all sanctions against Tehran. The Supreme National Security Council is a powerful body in charge of many key foreign policy decisions. The majority of the members are either directly or indirectly appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Any measure adopted by the Supreme National Security Council is not binding until it receives a final seal of approval from Khamenei.

## **The Lebanese Opportunity**

By Giora Eiland

- Normally, Israel's strategic thinking is characterized by two things: One, hyper-focus on risks and not enough focus on opportunities; and two, looking for military responses options to every challenge instead of diplomatic ones. It is worth looking at the situation currently developing in Lebanon a bit differently. There is an opportunity here, mainly diplomatic. The accepted wisdom in the world is that there are two camps in Lebanon, the "good guys" and the "bad guys." Sunnis, Christians and Druze are the good guys, whereas Hizbullah, an organization that relies on Shiite support but mainly on economic and military support from Iran, are the bad guys. If that is the situation, as conventional wisdom has it, we ought to try to help the good guys. In truth, the situation in Lebanon is quite different from this naïve portrayal.
- For 20 years the Lebanese state has been governed by a coalition of Sunni and Christian elites on one hand, and by Hizbullah on the other. This coalition is sucking the life out of the country. We are not talking about some secret agreement between two groups but, rather, about a string of overt governmental actions such as "national unity government" with the participation of both sides, about the joint choice to appoint a president and the agreement of both sides—the Christian minority and the Sunni elites together with Hizbullah—to benefit from the country's resources at the Lebanese public's expense. Even more, there is a clear division of labor. The good guys' job is apparently to be Lebanon's attractive public face in order to attract economic, military and diplomatic aid. Hizbullah's job is to be the only military force in Lebanon, while the Lebanese army is subservient to [Hizbullah] in every way.
- The additional meaning of this arrangement is that de facto Lebanon is controlled by Iran, because Lebanon is controlled militarily by Hizbullah and Hizbullah is controlled by Iran. The West is prepared to help Lebanon economically but only if economic reforms are introduced. The smart thing to do is for Israel to persuade the United States to give Lebanon two options. The first is to offer no aid at all, and possibly even to impose economic sanctions that would quickly deepen the crisis, to the point of hunger and no chance of recovery. The second option is to offer a generous aid package that is dependent not only on economic reform but also two other steps: Hizbullah would have to promise not to develop precision-guided ordnance, with the delivery of aid money conditional on strict oversight to guarantee that it was upholding its commitment.
- Secondly, Lebanon would have to sign an agreement with Israel marking the maritime border between the countries in keeping with the American compromise proposal. That American-European overture to Lebanon should be made openly and clearly. Yes, Hizbullah is a terror organization, but above all it is a grass-roots political organization that draws its standing from the legitimacy it gets from being "Lebanon's defense against Israel." This is the source of the organization's power, but also a point that will devour it: Hizbullah knows it cannot scuttle a process that is meant to rescue the rapidly-disintegrating country.

- **An American proposal, if one is made, would create domestic pressure on Hizbullah and a need for it to compromise on its ambitious military plan to maintain a large arsenal of precision-guided missiles. A process like this would also strengthen the United States with a view to Iran without risking anything. It would also reduce the potential threat emanating from Hizbullah, and possibly even give real hope to the Lebanese people. In addition, when Israel and Lebanon finally agree on a their maritime border will create a massive opportunity for Lebanon to pump natural gas, which would jumpstart the currently-stalled economy. The way to deal with Hizbullah doesn't need to rest solely on the military. Diplomatic options would be more effective and less dangerous.**

## **Freezing Out the Boycott**

By Itamar Eichner

- **The State of Israel and pro-Israel organizations in the United States launched a diplomatic, legislative and legal blitz against Ben & Jerry's and Unilever, which owns the ice cream company, with the goal of exacting a price for the company's decision to stop selling Ben & Jerry's products in the settlements. The goal is to repeat the success that Israel chalked up in April 2019 against Airbnb, when the American company walked back its decision to remove listings of properties in the settlements, and to send a message to other companies that they would do well not to emulate Ben & Jerry's decision. Israeli officials are worried that if the Ben & Jerry's boycott is successful, other companies that come under pressure from BDS activists might follow in its footsteps.**
- **Israeli officials say that a long list of companies are facing similarly intense pressure, including Puma, Adidas, Caterpillar, G4S, Pillsbury, HP, the Barcelona Football Club, Motorola and Booking.com. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett spoke with Unilever CEO Alan Jope. Ben & Jerry's is owned by Unilever. The prime minister told Jope that he viewed the decision to boycott Israel gravely, remarking that the company is a Unilever subsidiary that had chosen to take a patently anti-Israel course of action. Bennett said that the State of Israel views that decision as being one that would have serious legal and other repercussions, and said Israel would act firmly against any attempt to boycott its citizens. In coordination with Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, Israeli Ambassador to the UN Gilad Erdan sent an urgent letter to the governors of 35 states in the US that have already passed laws against the BDS movement and boycotting Israel. Those laws prohibit the states from investing their pension funds in companies that boycott Israel. Ambassador Erdan asked the governors to take steps against Ben & Jerry's. Erdan wrote that at a time that Arab countries are ending their boycotts against Israel and signing peace agreements, and at a time that cooperation in the Middle East is on the rise, it is inconceivable that American companies with radical agendas should act contrary to United States' policy and against normalization and peace, wrote Erdan in his letter to the governors.**
- **Foreign Ministry officials had worked behind the scenes to scuttle the Ben & Jerry's decision. Avi Zinger, the Israeli franchise holder, provided advance warning about the plans being made by the American ice cream company. Ben & Jerry's executives—who have come out in support of same-sex marriage, have been active on environmentalist issues and were highly critical of the Trump administration's policies—were flooded with emails from BDS activists during Operation Guardian of the Walls. Other social organizations that work with Ben & Jerry's were also pressured into threatening Ben & Jerry's that they would stop working with the company unless it agreed to stop selling its products in the settlements. Every Tweet posted by Ben & Jerry's was immediately responded to with accusations about how it was collaborating with the Israeli occupation.**

- Zinger provided Ben & Jerry's executives with background material, which the Foreign Ministry helped him to assemble, and reminded them that Ben & Jerry's employees were currently hunkering down in bomb shelters because they were under rocket attack out of Gaza. Zinger informed the executives that Israeli law prohibits boycotting the settlements, and if a truck full of ice cream leaves the factory in Beer Tuvia it is illegal to forbid it from distributing products to the Rami Levy supermarket in Mishor Adumim. Last Thursday the Boston Globe ran an article about Ben & Jerry's silence, and that was the straw that broke the camel's back. Tzippi Hotovely, the Israeli ambassador to the UK, spoke with Unilever CEO Alan Jope, while other Israeli representatives tried to persuade Ben & Jerry's not to rush to make any public announcement about a decision that in any event would only become effective in another 18 months [when the license of the current Israeli franchise holder is due to expire].
- Those efforts came to naught. "Their sense was that all of their social activism had been shut down for weeks," said one Foreign Ministry official. Ben & Jerry's decision has a range of possible ramifications. While Unilever does allow Ben & Jerry's certain liberties as pertain to its branding and social activism, Ben & Jerry's does not have commercial independence and it needs approval from Unilever if it wants to terminate its franchise agreement [with Zinger in Israel]. Israel is now focusing most of its efforts on Unilever. Meanwhile BDS activists have continued to attack Ben & Jerry's, unsatisfied with the scope of its most recent decision. "This isn't going to reduce the pressure. To the contrary," said one Israeli official. Israel intends to pursue legal action next. "We will do everything so that this doesn't pass quietly so that other companies aren't tempted to [follow suit].
- This is a test case. It's important to create deterrence." Will we soon see a wave of boycotts? One high-ranking Israeli official said he did not believe that that was likely. "The decision is nothing short of absurd. Last year Arab countries, such as Bahrain and the Emirates, repealed their Israeli boycott laws, and now an American company has come along to take this sort of initiative?" State Department Spokesperson Ned Price was asked yesterday about the new development. He said that while the Biden administration respected American citizens' freedom of speech, it would fight against any attempt to delegitimize Israel. He refused to comment specifically on the Ben & Jerry's issue. Meanwhile, several dozen Jewish-owned stores in the United States announced that they would either stop or scale back the sale of Ben & Jerry's products.