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Israel and Middle East News Update

Thursday, July 22

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News Excerpts

July 22, 2021

Ynet News

Netanyahu Speaks to Pfizer, Moderna Heads

Opposition Leader Benjamin Netanyahu spoke with the CEOs of Pfizer and Moderna several times in recent days to push for a third coronavirus vaccine dose while leaving Prime Minister Naftali Bennett out of the loop. Netanyahu apparently neglected to notify Bennett neither prior to nor after calling Pfizer and Moderna chiefs Albert Bourla and Stéphane Bancel, respectively. Following those conversations, the Likud leader came to the conclusion that Israel must immediately order millions more vaccines to protect the country's adult population over the age of 50 from the highly transmissible Delta variant. However, Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz claimed Israel is not currently experiencing any shortage of vaccines. Netanyahu has offered scathing criticism of Bennett's leadership since the new government was sworn in last month, removing Netanyahu from power after 12 years as Israel's longest-serving prime minister. [Dig Deeper "Israel's Government Must End Its Coronavirus Paralysis" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Israel Hayom

Herzog Calls Boycotts of Israel a 'New Form of Terrorism'

Boycotts of Israel are a new form of terrorism that is trying to hurt the citizens of Israel and the Israeli economy, President Isaac Herzog said at a ceremony honoring Israel's late prime ministers and presidents. Herzog made his statements after ice cream giant Ben & Jerry's announced it would stop selling its products beyond the Green Line, or as the company put it, in the "occupied Palestinian territories." "We must oppose boycott and terrorism in any form. The BDS campaign does not seek peace, and wants to undermine Israel's very existence. It is now taking aim at the Israeli economy," Herzog said. The president addressed Prime Minister Bennett, saying, "Mr. Prime Minister, I know you and your colleagues in the government think exactly like I do, and I hope, for all the Israeli people, that this is how you will act, for the sake of the unity of Israel." [Dig Deeper "Boycott Ben & Jerry's in US, but Buy It in Israel' - Ayelet Shaked" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Times of Israel

NSO Says It's Victim of 'an Orchestrated Campaign'

Pushing back against claims it has targeted more than a dozen heads of state and hundreds of journalists, Israeli spyware firm NSO Group denied being engaged in mass surveillance, calling the allegations against it "insinuations and slander." The company said that "an orchestrated campaign is being carried out against us." The statement came after a list was leaked of some 50,000 phone numbers believed to have been chosen by clients of NSO for possible surveillance. The list contained numbers for 14 heads of state. Reporting by media outlets including The Guardian, Le Monde and The Washington Post found that nearly 200 journalists from organizations including AFP were on the list. NSO is a giant of Israeli tech with 850 employees. [Dig Deeper "Reporters Without Borders Urges Israel to Stop Exporting Spyware" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Biden to Delay Reopening of Consulate at Israel's Request

At Israel's request, President Joe Biden's administration will delay reopening the US consulate in Jerusalem as a de facto mission to the Palestinians until the government passes a [budget](#), according to Walla. The US decision follows requests from the Prime Minister's Office and the Foreign Ministry. Walla also quotes an anonymous high-ranking Israeli source who claimed that Prime Minister Bennett is opposed to the reopening of the consulate, arguing that this contradicts the US recognition of Jerusalem in 2017 as the capital of Israel. The official clarified that the decision is not supposed to take a position on the borders of Jerusalem, the eastern part of which is claimed by the Palestinians. In 2019, the Trump administration merged the 175-year-old consulate in Jerusalem — which historically served as a de facto mission to the Palestinians — and the new US embassy in the city. [Dig Deeper “Biden Pushing off Jerusalem Mission Reopening Until Coalition Stabilizes” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Arutz Sheva

Court Gives Extension for Response on Khan Al-Ahmar

High Court justices Alex Stein, Noam Solberg and George Kara granted the state an extension of six weeks to hear how the state intends to fulfill the ruling ordering the destruction of Khan al-Ahmar, the illegal Arab outpost near Kfar Adumim. The judges gave an extension for the submission of the update notice on behalf of the state until September 5 and stressed: "And no more," expressing that they do not intend to grant another extension after this date. On Prime Minister Bennett's table is the proposal for evacuation with the consent of Khan al-Ahmar, in exchange for permanent residency and the authorization of a permanent settlement for the residents. Bennett will need to decide whether to accept the proposal. [Dig Deeper “Bedouin Shepherds Used Palestinian Land With Permission. Israel Seized Their Tents Anyway” \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Times of Israel

Israeli Jets Strike Inside Syria for Second Time This Week

Israeli planes carried out airstrikes Syria for the second night this week, Damascus said, while claiming that most missiles were shot down. The state-run SANA broadcaster reported that Syrian air defenses were confronted “Israeli aggression” in the skies near Homs. It said Israeli jets fired missiles from north of Beirut at targets in al-Qusayr, a town near Homs. The report claimed “most of the hostile missiles” were shot down. There were no immediate reports of casualties or damage. Israel's military does not comment on reports of specific strikes. The attack comes as tensions between Israel and its northern neighbors have peaked in recent days. Late Monday, Israeli aircraft reportedly fired missiles at a number of sites near Aleppo in northern Syria. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a war monitor that has activists on the ground in Syria, said the Israeli strikes targeted weapons depots that belong to Iranian-backed militia operating the area. The group said the strikes were followed by loud explosions. The weapons depots were located inside Syrian military posts, the group said. [Dig Deeper “Syrian Air Defenses Confront an Israeli 'Aggression' Over Homs -State TV” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

After Erdoğan Call, Israel Reassures Greece

After holding a rare call last week with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President Isaac Herzog spoke to his Greek counterpart and reassured her that any improvement in Israel's relations with Turkey won't come at the expense of Greece. During over a decade of strained relations with Turkey, Israel created an alliance with Greece and Cyprus focused on political, security and energy cooperation. But Erdoğan and Herzog discussed the potential for better relations and energy cooperation — a matter of concern for Greece, which is in a standoff with Turkey over natural gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean. Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias arrived in Israel and discussed Turkey in a meeting with Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, where Lapid downplayed the call with Erdoğan. Turkey has sent several signals that it wants to improve relations with Israel since President Biden took office — a message reiterated by Turkey's ambassador in Washington in meetings with Jewish groups. Israeli officials said the Foreign Ministry supported Herzog's call with Erdoğan but doesn't think a major breakthrough is possible with Turkey at the moment. Israel expressed grave concern over the unilateral move by Turkey to take control of parts of the ghost city of [Varosha](#) in the demilitarized zone between Turkish-aligned Northern Cyprus and the rest of the island. Lapid called his Cypriot counterpart to express support. The Biden administration also condemned the "provocative" move and said it would refer it to the UN Security Council. [Dig Deeper "The Conflict Between Turkey and Cyprus Over the Varosha Ghost Town" \(AI-Monitor\)](#)

Associated Press

Iran Says Police Officer, Citizen Killed Amid Water Protests

An Iranian police officer and another person have been killed in the country's restive southwest amid ongoing demonstrations over water shortages, state media reported, raising the death toll so far in the unrest to at least three. According to the state-run IRNA news agency, gunfire killed the officer in the city of Mahshar and another suffered a gunshot wound to his leg. The report blamed "rioters" for the killing, without elaborating. Iranian state television reported that a "citizen" had been killed in the demonstrations in the town of Izeh, without providing details. Another 14 police officers suffered injuries in the unrest, the TV report said. A third man was killed earlier in the protests, according to Iranian media reports. Iran has in the past blamed demonstrators for deaths occurring amid heavy-handed crackdowns by security forces. There have been six days of continuous protests in Iran's oil-rich Khuzestan province, home to ethnic Arabs who complain of discrimination by Iran's Shiite theocracy. US State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters that Washington was following closely reports that Iranian security forces fired on protesters. "We support the rights of Iranians to peacefully assemble and express themselves without fear of violence, without fear of arbitrary detention by security forces," he said. Water worries in the past have sent angry demonstrators into the streets in Iran. The country has faced rolling blackouts for weeks now, in part over what authorities describe as a severe drought. Precipitation had decreased by almost 50% in the last year, leaving dams with dwindling water supplies. [Dig Deeper "Water Crisis Protests Persist in Iran, With Chants in Capital" \(Reuters\)](#)

The Urgent Problems

By Matan Wasserman

- **The government of change has been taking flak from the right wing and from the left wing. Samaria Regional Council Chairman Yossi Dagan reacted fiercely to a report [in Israel Hayom yesterday] as if the government, under pressure from the Biden administration, had agreed to postpone the meeting of the [Civil Administration's] Supreme Planning and Construction Committee, which grants construction permits in Judea & Samaria (West Bank). "I call on Prime Minister Naftali Bennett to make it unequivocally clear that the government that he heads will not freeze construction in Judea & Samaria and Jerusalem," said Dagan. "About half a million citizens live in Judea & Samaria, and another 400,000 live in East Jerusalem and northern Jerusalem.**
- **Jerusalem and Judea & Samaria are the heart of the State of Israel, and all governments must build in them. I hope that the report isn't true and call on the prime minister to clarify the matter and to approve construction." Dagan further said: "The excuses about American pressure didn't hold water under previous governments headed by Binyamin Netanyahu. To the same degree, they don't hold water for the government headed by Naftali Bennett. "Just as I personally, and all of settlement enterprise and all of the national camp, fought courageously against a construction freeze in previous governments—so we will all fight courageously and stand like a fortified wall so that there be no construction freeze of any kind in Judea & Samaria and Jerusalem during this government's tenure. The Israeli public expects construction momentum during this government and the Biden administration's tenure. The ball was never in Washington's hands. It always was and is today and will be in the future in Jerusalem, in the prime minister's hands." The Prime Minister's Bureau issued a statement: "There was no American demand on this matter. The supreme planning committee has not convened since January. The prime minister, during all those months, was not Bennett." There is also pressure on the government from the left side of the political map. Meretz representatives are scheduled to meet today with Defense Minister Benny Gantz and tell him that contrary to agreements, the government has leaned to the right on matters of security.**
- **The faction members will raise three issues that they find unacceptable: 1. The arrangement that was reached between Gantz and the Evyatar settlers, which leaves the houses in place. 2. The recent removal of a number of Palestinian outposts, some of which are in the Jordan Valley. 3. What Meretz describes as "settler violence against Palestinians with no intervention from the IDF." "As far as we are concerned, things can't go on this way, and will make that clear at the meeting," said MK Mossi Raz of Meretz. The matter of Khan al-Ahmar is also on the table. Deputy Defense Minister Alon Schuster said in a radio interview. This was after Foreign Minister and Alternate Prime Minister Yair Lapid asked Cabinet Secretary Shalom Shlomo on Sunday to postpone the outpost's removal once again, until the diplomatic and security consequences could be reviewed.**

Volcano

By Orit Lavi-Nesiel

- Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's announcement about "freedom of worship for Jews on the Temple Mount" morphed within less than 24 hours into "freedom to visit." The first sounded natural coming from the chairman of Yamina, previously the chairman of the Jewish Home and the former director general of the Yesha Council. One can easily imagine him visiting the Temple Mount in the company of Yomtob Kalfon and Amichai Chikli. But as prime minister, one expects him to understand of the volatility of what he says. The reactions were quick in coming. The first to rejoice were the Temple Mount devotees, who celebrated the announcement of the change in status quo prematurely. This was followed by angry reactions from the UAL—members of the Islamic Movement and Bennett's partners. Very quickly there arrived a sternly worded message from King Abdullah, compelling Bennett to make a swift U-turn and issue a "clarification." This was echoed by the Prime Minister's Bureau which issued a statement: the comment that Jews have freedom of worship on the Temple Mount was a mistake." As if this were just a "comment," as if the words had not been said by the prime minister. A mistake. People make mistakes. For the first time since sitting in the seat of the prime minister, Bennett was torn between his worldview and his job.
- In the first weeks of his tenure, Bennett made the need to rebuild the dismal relationship with the Hashemite kingdom his top priority, and rightly so. The countries share a 500-kilometer border, Israel and Jordan have common security, economic and tourism interests, and Jordan is a close neighbor, moderate and positive in the region. When Netanyahu was prime minister, the relationship had ups and mainly downs. Bennett did not want his extraneous remark to stop the first buds of trust that he had begun to achieve with the royal house to be cut down before blooming. That said, what happens on the Temple Mount does not stay on the Temple Mount. On the eve of Tisha B'Av, the media reported about the orchestrated nationalist bragging by right-wing campaigners who talked about an all-time record number of Jews visiting the Temple Mount on a single day, 1,679 exactly.
- The pictures that were broadcast showed the police closing its eyes and not enforcing the rules barring Jews from praying and holding religious ceremonies in the al-Aqsa compound. Furthermore, a group of visitors, including Chikli and former MK Shuli Mualem, spontaneously broke into song with the national anthem. "Hatikvah," said Mualem disingenuously, "is not a prayer, but a sign of sovereignty." In other words—the Temple Mount is in our hands. Mualem is a relatively new visitor. Her life circumstances led her to the Temple Mount a decade ago. Since then, she has visited repeatedly. For her, and for a growing handful of people, the Temple Mount is not just a matter of religious yearning, but is an expression of governance. The Temple Mount is a means to an end. Ariel Sharon discovered its political qualities more than 20 years ago. He has been emulated since. The most sophisticated of them is former MK Yehuda Glick, who gives guided tours of the Temple Mount.

- **Whatever the reason—religious, national or political, Temple Mount devotees seek to continue the Six-Day War from the point that Moshe Dayan and Motte Gur left off. Preserving the arrangement with the Muslim Waqf is viewed by them as an historic mistake that needs to be corrected. Movements that were considered fringe and extremist movements in the past have campaigned their way into the heart of the Israeli consensus in the last few years and have settled in people’s hearts. The Temple Mount Faithful, Women for the Temple, The Temple Mount is in Our hands, the Temple Mount Yeshiva and the Drishat Tziyon Yeshiva, and that is only a partial list. The activism of these extremists is liable to ignite a religious war. It is the responsibility of the sovereign (the Israeli government and the Knesset) to let go of its obsessive need to demonstrate who is the boss on the Temple Mount and to calm down everyone who seeking to gain political points at its expense.**