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## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Friday, August 27*

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# News Excerpts

August 27, 2021

Times of Israel

## **Israeli Leaders Condemn ‘Horrorific’ Kabul Airport Bombings**

Israeli leaders expressed their condolences over the deadly attacks at Kabul airport, which killed at least 72 people and wounded dozens more. “On behalf of the people of Israel, I share our deep sadness over the loss of American lives in Kabul,” Prime Minister Naftali Bennett tweeted. Bennett is currently in Washington and was scheduled to meet yesterday with President Joe Biden, but the meeting was delayed to this [morning](#) because of the attacks. “My thoughts and prayers are with the US troops and the Afghan people in Kabul, following the attacks that recently took place,” Defense Minister Benny Gantz said. [Dig Deeper “As We Watch the Rise of the Taliban, US-Israel Alliance Is More Critical than Ever” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

## **Bennett, Biden Face Intelligence Sharing Gap**

Prime Minister Bennett and President Biden face a major gap in intelligence sharing left by former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, according to [The New York Times](#). Israel says Iran is getting closer to obtaining the materials needed for a nuclear weapon and that a military option must be prepared. US officials continue to express a preference for a diplomatic solution. Netanyahu worked closely with the administration of former President Donald Trump, but when Biden assumed office, intelligence sharing between the two countries was significantly reduced, according to the report. When Israel allegedly attacked the Natanz nuclear facility in April, for example, the Mossad supposedly gave the US less than two hours notice before the blast, US and Israeli officials told the Times, leaving the US no time to assess the operation or ask for it to be called off. [Dig Deeper “Biden, Bennett Seek to Reset Relations, Narrow Differences on Iran” \(Ynet News\)](#)

Ynet News

## **Germany’s Merkel Calls off Israel Trip Due to Afghan Crisis**

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has called off a planned weekend visit to Israel because of the situation in Afghanistan, the German government said. It was called off in consultation with Prime Minister Bennett "because of current developments in Afghanistan," Merkel's office said in a statement. Germany is one of the countries that have been scrambling to evacuate from Kabul its own nationals and Afghans who helped its forces during a nearly two-decade deployment in the country. Merkel's office said the intention is for the chancellor to go ahead with her visit at an unspecified later time. The German leader had planned to meet with Bennett in Jerusalem and participate in Sunday's Cabinet meeting. Merkel is approaching the end of her time in office. She isn't running in Germany's national election on Sept. 26 but it isn't yet clear when she will step down. In Germany, the outgoing government stays in office until a new one is sworn in and forming a coalition can be a time-consuming process.

## **US Calls on Hamas to Show Restraint as Riots Resume**

Hundreds of Palestinians demonstrated near the Israeli border in the southern Gaza Strip, calling on Israel to ease a crippling blockade days after a similar gathering ended in deadly clashes with the Israeli army. Protesters hurled firebombs and rocks at the Israeli troops but overall, the demonstration wrapped up without a repeat of Saturday's intense clashes after Hamas kept the crowds from approaching the separation wall. Egypt, which has been trying to broker a long-term cease-fire had appealed to the Islamic militant group to calm things down. After the demonstration ended, Hamas officials announced that Gaza's border crossing with Egypt was partially reopening. Palestinian medics reported at least 14 people were wounded, including five people who suffered gunshots. Soheil al-Hendi, a Hamas official, said the group had made a "great effort" to avoid bloodshed. [Dig Deeper "Despite Tensions with Hamas, Israel Announces Further Relief Measures for Gaza" \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

## **Palestinians: No Return to Peace Talks under US Leadership**

The Palestinians are opposed to a return to the peace negotiations with Israel under the leadership of the US, senior Palestinian official Azzam al-Ahmed said. The Palestinians are also opposed to any US policy that envisages the management of the conflict as a substitute for solutions, he added. The Palestinians, he said, insist that any future peace talks with Israel be held on the basis of PA President Mahmoud Abbas's initiative for convening an international peace conference with the participation of various parties, including the Quartet (the US, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations), Jordan, Egypt, South Africa and China. Abbas made his initiative last year when he called on UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to convene an international conference in early 2021 to launch "a genuine peace process" with Israel. Abbas urged Guterres to work with the Quartet and the UN Security Council on a conference "with full authority and with the participation of all concerned parties." [Dig Deeper "Bennett's Swap of Palestinian Statehood for Stability Is a Mirage" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## **Turkey Sees Positive Developments in Saudi, Egypt Ties**

There may soon be positive developments in Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Turkish presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said, as Ankara aims to ease tensions with regional powers that have impacted Turkey's economy. Already strained relations with Saudi Arabia collapsed after the killing by Saudi agents of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018. Ankara's ties with Cairo have also been poor since the military overthrew Egypt's first democratically elected president, Mohamed Mursi of the Muslim Brotherhood eight years ago. President Tayyip Erdogan, whose ruling AK Party is rooted in political Islam, had been a strong supporter of Mursi. Erdogan met a senior official from the [UAE](#) last week and said ties with Gulf state were improving. The two countries have been at odds over the conflict in Libya and internal Gulf disputes. [Dig Deeper "Senior UAE Official Meets Qatar's Emir in Rare Visit" \(Reuters\)](#)

## **Algiers Hints It Would Give up Morocco Gas Pipeline**

Algeria said that all supplies of natural gas in Spain are now provided through its gas pipeline connecting the two countries, bypassing Morocco, Algeria's official news agency APS reported. The announcement, which comes two days after Algeria announced the severance of diplomatic relations with Morocco, suggests that Algiers will do without the Maghreb-Europe gas pipeline, which connects Europe via Morocco. During a meeting with the Spanish Ambassador, the Algerian Minister of Energy and Mines Mohamed Arkab affirmed "Algeria's total commitment to cover all of Spain's natural gas supplies through the Medgaz" which directly connects the two countries, according to a ministry statement reported by APS. The minister underlined in this context "the recent project to extend the capacity of the Medgaz gas pipeline" and recalled according to APS "the efforts made by Algeria to guarantee the security of natural gas supplies to the Spanish market." Last week, before Algeria decided to "review" and then completely sever its relations with Morocco, the kingdom said it was in favor of maintaining the Maghreb-Europe gas pipeline, the contract of which is due to expire in October 2021. Algiers announced on Tuesday that it was severing diplomatic relations with Rabat, citing "relentless hostile acts perpetrated by Morocco against Algeria." [Dig Deeper "Morocco 'Regrets' Algeria's Decision to Cut Diplomatic Ties" \(Associated Press\)](#)

## **Israeli National Reportedly Stabbed to Death in Morocco**

An Israeli national was stabbed to death in the Moroccan city of Tangier, according to reports from the North African nation. According to some reports, the Israeli national, who owns a kosher restaurant in the city, brought food to a homeless person who suddenly attacked him. Moroccan news website Tanjanews reported that the homeless man stabbed the 60-year-old after he refused to give him a job at the restaurant. Another report stated that the attacker had a criminal background and may also be suffering from mental issues. The attacker is said to have stabbed the restaurant owner — who was described as a Jew with "foreign citizenship" — with a small knife. Local police have launched an investigation and have reportedly arrested the 36-year-old suspect. Investigators examine whether there was an anti-Semitic motive behind the attack. The Foreign Ministry and the International Unit at ZAKA — an Israeli emergency response group — are working to release the body of the deceased and bring him for burial in Israel. Morocco's Jewish population is estimated at 2,500, most of them residing in Casablanca. There are also tiny Jewish communities in the capital of Rabat and several other cities. The North African kingdom agreed last year to normalize ties with Israel as part of the U.S.-brokered Abraham Accords.

## **Learning from the Egyptians**

By Yossi Yehoshua

- **At In the shadow of the preparations for the Biden- Bennett summit, this week's important event for Israel that did not get major media coverage was the Egyptians' decision to punish Hamas and close the Rafah crossing in wake of the riots on the fence in the area where Border Policeman Barel Shmueli was wounded. Ever since Operation Guardian of the Walls, the Egyptians—with American backing—have become the dominant player in mediating between Israel and Hamas. They have been trying to promote not only a regular truce arrangement, but one that will also ultimately include a prisoner exchange deal, which currently seems rather remote. Last week, after the rocket fire on Sderot, a high-ranking Israeli security figure paid a visit to Cairo for a series of meetings. Yahya Sinwar later got a phone call from there with a clear message: dir balak [Arabic for “watch yourself”].**
- **This is the last infraction. And then came the violent demonstration in the area of Karni, and the Egyptians saw not only how Hamas was facilitating it, sending its people to the border and not stopping the demonstrators, but also the fact that the terrorist who shot the soldier at point-blank range was a Hamas member and has become a hero in Gaza. You don't play games with Egyptian intelligence chief Abbas Kamel and President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Egypt closed the Rafah crossing on both sides. That was a serious punishment for Hamas: 7,000 Gazans were left on the Egyptian side, thousands more were stuck in Cairo and didn't move towards Rafah, like many others who planned to return. Additionally, goods were not brought into Gaza via the crossing, which aggravated the siege.**
- **Most importantly, civilians (including senior Hamas officials) did not head for Egypt. They cannot go overseas via Israel. All that made Hamas think twice about the demonstration that it held in Khan Yunis, which is why it was limited: in order to mitigate the Egyptians' fury. In response, they somewhat loosened the noose and announced that the Rafah crossing would be gradually reopened. For the time being, Israel also carried out a kind of gesture yesterday, allowing more goods into Gaza. The Egyptians' tough policy is an excellent lesson for Israel. Whoever wants a truce arrangement with Hamas has to do so in the language of the Middle East. Any sign of obsequiousness is interpreted as weakness for Hamas to exploit. Moving forward to ease conditions is right—improving the humanitarian situation in Gaza is in Israel's interest—but it cannot be done under conditions of extortion.**
- **While it's true that compared to the days after the previous rounds of fighting, this time the process for reopening the Gaza Strip is better controlled. Yet unlike in the past, Hamas, and mainly Sinwar—whom Israel takes very seriously—is challenging it. Despite Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi's statements that the IDF is prepared for another round, the most updated situation assessment in the IDF General Staff is that Hamas does not want another round of fighting at this stage—and that Sinwar is under heavy Egyptian pressure, as well as domestic pressure, to avoid a clash.**

- **But as we've seen before, intelligence assessments should be taken with a grain of salt and we must remember that the situation on the ground is volatile. An event such as the one that took place on Saturday on the border is liable to end with a local flare-up. For now, the Gaza Division has learned the lesson and changed its methods for handling disturbances: no more snipers who can be hit, more troops, and less strict rules of engagement with the goal of keeping the soldiers safe. The army realizes that the last shooting event was formative, mainly because it not only affected the combatants, but also the parents who send their children to units who are deployed in this area.**

## **Crucial Mission**

By Ben Caspit

- It cannot be overstated how important Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's trip to Washington is. His mission is to create intimate, warm and personal cooperation with the most powerful man in the world. Joe Biden said before that he is a non-Jewish Zionist. However, he subscribes to left-wing opinions. Naftali Bennett, if you ignore the filth that's spewing from the mouths of the shrieking Bibi-ists for a moment, is a Jewish Zionist with right-wing opinions. The mission won't be easy, although Bennett can be quite simpatico in one-on-one settings. Forming a personal connection is essential to the attempt to salvage something from the flames, which Bennett's predecessor lit and fanned, that consumed part of Israel's strategic assets in the United States.
- . In the protracted meetings that Bennett held prior to the trip, an effort was made to create a simple formula that would enable the new relationship that he is trying to form with Washington to function like the coalition: working together, encouraging each other, and refraining from publicly airing their dirty laundry despite their differing outlooks, approaches and ideologies. Or, as Bennett himself put it: we agree on 80%, so no breaking things over the 20% that's left. Bennett's greatest asset as he embarks on this difficult mission is Binyamin Netanyahu. The Democrats in America saw Netanyahu mark them, saw him actively support two Republican candidates (Mitt Romney and Donald Trump), saw him humiliate a Democratic president in the House of Representatives and turn a sitting president into a political punching bag without batting an eye. If we forced him, Biden would rather have Bezalel Smotrich in the Prime Minister's Bureau than Netanyahu.
- The Americans are settling for less: working with someone who won't lie to them around the clock and won't embarrass them on a weekly basis. That's all. There is one disagreement between Israel and the US that cannot be bridged: the Americans aspire to rejoin the JCPOA with Iran, while Israel is convinced that the agreement in its current form is bad. Bennett has already decided not to get into a public confrontation on that issue. He knows that that won't help. How does he know? From the fact that Netanyahu did get into a public confrontation with Barack Obama on that issue, and it didn't help. The agreement was signed. Netanyahu managed to cause massive strategic damage to Israel's most vital interests, and Bennett is now trying to mitigate that damage.
- For those who forgot: Obama not only went for the nuclear agreement "over Bibi's head," but also got even with him (and us) by not vetoing an anti-settlement resolution in the UN Security Council towards the end of his term and by not upgrading the military aid agreement for an entire decade, as he could have. Don't believe the Bibi-ists who boast about this agreement. It could have been much bigger, had Netanyahu listened to those who explained this to him in real time. Then came the gift that kept on giving (I'm not being sarcastic), the unbridled redhead named Trump. Contrary to the messianic Bibi-ist credo, Trump was not elected thanks to Netanyahu, and not even thanks to God. That didn't stop Netanyahu from partying like there was no tomorrow.

- The problem is that there was a tomorrow. That tomorrow is now today, which Netanyahu did not think about. He didn't prepare a back-up plan in case Trump lost. He didn't prepare a pertinent military option in case none of the options that he hoped for came to pass: Iranian capitulation and the signing of a better agreement, an American air strike, or the collapse of the Iranian government. On the contrary: Iran did not collapse under the "maximum pressure" policy, it coped, and it began violating the agreement (which, from its point of view, was justifiable), accelerated its enrichment of uranium, came very close to the status of a nuclear threshold state, and now we are faced with all of this with Trump gone. Only we are left on the ground, to pick up the fragments of Netanyahu's hubris. So now Bennett has to clean up all of this. He will try to rally the Americans into an arrangement that both countries agree on, including all possible scenarios, including a new nuclear agreement between Iran and the world powers. To maximize the understandings, to agree on alternatives together, on what to do if Iran violates the agreement, how to verify that it is not getting closer to nuclear [weapons capabilities] covertly, how to compensate Israel, how to preserve its qualitative military edge, and so on and so forth.
- Bennett will also be on a mission to persuade the Americans to publicly display a serious and convincing military option against Iran. The Americans have not been keen on this option so far. The challenge facing Bennett and his people will be to convince them that this posture is essential, even for appearance's sake. Had the meeting taken place yesterday as planned, Bennett would have been expected to mention to Biden that the one time that Iran suspended one of the tracks of its nuclear program (which Biden remembers well) on its own initiative ("the weapons group") was when the Americans invaded Iraq. "You don't have to invade anywhere," Bennett planned to tell Biden. "We won't [ask you to] send American mothers' children to fight on foreign soil. It's merely for deterrence, using the superpower status of the US."
- Deploying two carrier groups to the Persian Gulf, while explicitly warning that "all options are on the table," can make the difference between a self-confident Iran sticking its tongue out and a deliberating, hesitant Iran that is under stress. "It all depends on how much the Iranians believe America is capable of using force," the Israelis would have told the Americans. "If the military option is convincing and real, that will do the trick." Bennett was supposed to not mention the word "Afghanistan," but it became obvious during the talks in Washington that the sides would be hard put to ignore the gigantic elephant in the room.
- The solution is simple: survey the erosion in the US's status in the Middle East in light of its allies' fears that the Americans will make a rapid exit and abandon the region to the Iranians' tender mercies. Intelligence material has indicated that a rapprochement between the region's Sunni countries and Iran is underway. The classic example is Qatar, but there are more. Bennett will caution his American audience that the sense that the Americans are leaving and the Iranians are winning could be destructive and cause the whole edifice to collapse. Hizbullah will be mentioned too. Netanyahu bequeathed a difficult legacy, almost too difficult, on this issue too.

- **An arsenal nearing 200,000 rockets, a [program to upgrade them into] precision-guided rockets that will soon cross the red line. Bennett will ask for American backing in view of a potential escalation in the north, billions in aid to replenish the stockpile of interceptor missiles, ammunition, and other strategic aid. He will be more cautious about two topics in the talks: China's economic involvement in Israel and the situation with the Palestinians. Bennett will try not to step on these landmines, despite wide-ranging preparatory work that was done ahead of the meeting with the president. On the Palestinian issue, he'll try to have it both ways. There won't be any annexation, but there won't be any peace negotiations either. There will be construction in the settlements, but the Palestinians will be authorized to build in Area C too.**
- **Most importantly, Israel will do the maximum to be forthcoming towards the Palestinian Authority on economic matters, to keep Abu Mazen's head above water. Bennett will have a harder time on the Chinese issue. The American administration was sensitive to this during Trump's time in office too. The difference was that Trump just made threats, but did not follow through. Israel was the pampered child, and the US the forgiving parent who turned a blind eye. But Trump is gone. Now Biden's in office, and he considers China the greatest threat to the US. The great Satan on steroids. Israel will have to choose a side. It cannot help but choose the American side. Spoiler alert: Netanyahu, by means of his screeching envoys, will claim again that "Bennett is ruining relations with the Chinese." In this case too, like all the rest, that is a coarse and cynical lie, pitiful manipulation that is completely divorced from the truth.**