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Israel and Middle East News Update

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Headlines:

- **Bennett: Biden Meeting 'Achieved All Goals and Beyond'**
- **Palestinians Riot near Gaza Border Fence**
- **Palestinian President Meets with Israeli Defense Minister**
- **PA: US Commitment to Two-States Good, but Insufficient**
- **US Concerned about Treatment of Ex-Jordanian Official**
- **Iranian, Gulf Arab Officials Meet in Baghdad**
- **Iran and Syria Vow to Confront US Sanctions**
- **Israel Mulls Helping Transport Afghan Refugees**

Commentary:

- **Yedioth Ahronoth: "From the White House, Via Afghanistan All the Way to Tehran"**
 - By Nahum Barnea
- **Ma'ariv: "Heading Home with a Full Basket"**
 - By Ben Caspit

News Excerpts

August 30, 2021

Ynet News

Bennett: Biden Meeting 'Achieved All Goals and Beyond'

Boarding a plane back to Israel, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said that his meeting with President Joe Biden at the White House "achieved all the goals we have out for ourselves and beyond." Bennett said that both leaders agreed on a joint strategic work plan to impede Iran's attempts to obtain nuclear arms. Bennett also cited "significant advancement" vis-a-vis Israel's security and placing the Jewish state on the US visa waiver list, which he said Biden ordered to settle "as soon as possible." Commenting on the IDF airstrikes in the Gaza Strip following Palestinian protests on the border fence and the launch of several arson balloons, Bennett remarked that Israel will continue to act "according to its own interests," adding that Israel considers Hamas responsible for any escalation in violence along the southern frontier. [Dig Deeper "Biden Meeting Signals Real Start of Bennett's Premiership" \(Ynet News\)](#)

I24 News

Palestinians Riot near Gaza Border Fence

Palestinian rioters in the Gaza Strip set tires on fire and hurled improvised explosive devices and rocks at the border fence separating the enclave from Israel. Israeli security forces responded with tear gas and the occasional round of live fire. Similar scenes played out in the vicinity of the border fence on Saturday night, followed by retaliatory strikes by the IDF against targets in the coastal enclave. Additionally, terrorists kept flying incendiary balloons into Israeli territory, torching agricultural lands. A Hamas spokesman said that "the Zionist occupation bears all the repercussions and consequences of the tightening of the siege on Gaza and the escalation of the humanitarian crisis among its residents. No calm or stability will be achieved as long as our people lack a free and dignified life." [Dig Deeper "Coronavirus in Gaza: Third Wave Begins in Tandem with School Year" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Reuters

Palestinian President Meets with Israeli Defense Minister

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas met with Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz in the West Bank city of Ramallah, officials said. It was the highest-level meeting between Abbas and an Israeli minister to be made public since Israel's new government was formed in June. Gantz, who heads a centrist party, told Abbas that Israel would take measures to strengthen the [Palestinian economy](#), according to a statement from his office. Peace talks between the two sides collapsed in 2014, though Israel over the past year has reached normalization agreements with a number of Arab countries, under US sponsorship. Prime Minister [Bennett](#) opposes Palestinian statehood. But given the makeup of his coalition, any sensitive policy decisions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would be difficult. The meeting in Ramallah came just a couple of days after Bennett met with President Biden in the White House, during which Biden reiterated support for a two-state solution.

PA: US Commitment to Two-States Good, but Insufficient

Palestinian officials expressed satisfaction with President Biden's renewed commitment to the two-state solution, but said that they were disappointed that he did not call for an immediate cessation of settlement construction and Israeli "assaults" on Palestinians. Commenting on the meeting in Washington between Biden and Prime Minister Bennett, the officials expressed hope that the president would follow up on his support for the two-state solution by exerting pressure on Israel to abide by international resolutions pertaining to the Israeli-Arab conflict. Biden did not refer to the two-state solution at all in his public statements during the meeting with Bennett. The Palestinians, he said, want the Biden administration to "take real steps to stop Israel from sabotaging efforts to revive the peace process and achieve the two-state solution on the basis of an independent Palestinian state on the 1967 borders, with east Jerusalem as its capital." [Dig Deeper "Biden Raised Reopening of Jerusalem Consulate, Opposition to Evictions, with PM" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Associated Press

US Concerned about Treatment of Ex-Jordanian Official

The State Department has raised concerns with Jordan about the possible mistreatment of a former top official imprisoned for sedition in an alleged plot against the Western-allied monarchy involving the half-brother of King Abdullah II. Representatives for Bassem Awadallah, who is a US citizen, have said the trial lacked due process and alleged his client has endured inhumane conditions, including beatings, torture and solitary confinement. Jordan rejects the charges. A State Department official confirmed the US Embassy in Amman "expressed concerns to the government of Jordan over allegations of mistreatment and the denial of family visits." The official, speaking on condition of anonymity under department guidelines, said that Jordan denied the allegations. "The embassy will continue to provide all appropriate consulate assistance to Mr. Awadallah in line with our commitment to assisting US citizens abroad," the official said. The US considers Jordan a key ally and source of stability in the turbulent Middle East and rarely expresses criticism of the kingdom in public.

Reuters

Iranian, Gulf Arab Officials Meet in Baghdad

Iranian and Gulf Arab officials met in Baghdad on the sidelines of a regional summit that Iraq hoped would encourage its neighbors to talk to each other instead of settling scores on its territory. The meetings come months after regional foes Iran and Saudi Arabia resumed direct talks in Iraq which have achieved no breakthrough but have helped offset escalating [tension](#) in the Middle East. Iraq's security has improved in recent years but it is still plagued by big power rivalries, rampant corruption among its own politicians and heavily armed militia groups. Competition for influence in the Middle East between Iran on one side and the US, Israel and Gulf Arab states on the other has made Iraq the scene of attacks against US forces and assassinations of Iranian and Iraqi paramilitary leaders. There was no indication of any direct meetings between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but Iraq said talks between the two countries, which began in April, were continuing.

Iran and Syria Vow to Confront US Sanctions

Iran and Syria vowed to take “mighty steps” to confront US sanctions imposed on the two regional allies, saying their relations will strengthen under Iran’s new leadership. The announcement was made by Iran’s new Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, who was received at the airport a visit to Damascus by his Syrian counterpart, Faisal Mekdad. Iran has been one of Syrian President Bashar Assad’s strongest backers, sending thousands of fighters from around the region to help his troops in Syria’s 10-year conflict that has killed half a million and displaced half the country’s pre-war population of 23 million. With the help of Russia and Iran, Syrian government forces now control much of Syria. But the country has been suffering for years under American and European Union sanctions. US Treasury sanctions have targeted a network that spans Syria, Iran and Russia, and which is responsible for shipping oil to the Syrian government. American sanctions were imposed on Tehran after former President Donald Trump pulled America out of a nuclear deal between Iran and world powers in 2018.

Israel Mulls Helping Transport Afghan Refugees

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett is weighing offering the Biden administration Israel’s assistance in transporting Afghan refugees from US bases to a third country of resettlement, according to two sources familiar with the matter. The sources clarified that Israel was not offering to resettle any refugees in Israel and that those fleeing the country since the Taliban’s takeover would not set foot on Israeli soil. However, the proposal under consideration would see Israel help in the airlift of the refugees from US military bases in Qatar and Kuwait — where thousands who managed to escape are currently being housed — to a third country of resettlement. The sources declined to provide further details, with one of them describing the sensitive proposal as “still in flux.” A coalition official said the Prime Minister’s Office and the Foreign Ministry had both been approached by US officials on the Afghan refugee issue, without elaborating further. The transport idea was then floated by Bennett’s aides ahead of the premier’s trip to Washington last week as a possible goodwill gesture to the Biden administration by the new prime minister, said one source familiar with the discussions.

From the White House, Via Afghanistan All the Way to Tehran

By Nahum Barnea

- **A visit by an Israeli prime minister to Washington is like an Israeli song entry in the Eurovision contest—you can like the song and the performance or not. Either way, you keep your fingers crossed and hope that it wins. As fate would have it, the meeting between Bennett and President Biden was scheduled for the hardest day in his presidency. Half an hour before the secured motorcade was scheduled to leave for the White House, a suicide bomber detonated his bomb belt at the gate to the airport in Kabul. The meeting with Bennett was postponed by 24 hours, a postponement that allowed the administration to focus on the developments in Afghanistan, but which didn't change its agenda by a millimeter. The man whom Bennett met the following day at the White House is now fighting by the skin of his teeth for his presidency's effectiveness and vitality. On paper, he still has another three and a half years at least. But in terms of the political timeline, he may not have more than a year.**
- **The two developments that pose a threat to him are Afghanistan and COVID. His inability to deal with illegal immigration from Mexico and legislative changes that are designed to improve the Republicans' situation ahead of the midterm elections next year are just over the horizon as well. Only seven months have passed since Biden entered the White House. The world let out a sigh of relief when he assumed his duties, in hope of a period of restoration after four years of Trump. His intentions are good. The outcome has been less so. It was good for Biden to meet the leader of a Middle Eastern country that supports the United States unwaveringly and seeks its patronage. But he knows that Bennett can't help him. That meeting was meaningless and had zero impact on his fight over public perception. The meeting in the Oval Office may have pleased Israelis, it may have irked Arabs and it may have bothered regime officials in Tehran—but it occurred on the outer edges of the American agenda.**
- **As is the norm, the two leaders received the media while seated on the yellow sofas in the Oval Office, the host on the left, the guest on the right, and the fireplace in between them—a reminder that this terrible summer is going to end at some point and winter will return. Biden looked and mainly sounded very old, too old. His voice was weak, his eyes bleary. A political official in the prime minister's entourage said afterwards that during the one-on-one meeting Biden was sharp and focused and was fully informed of all the details. That official's impression is more important than mine. The one-on-one meeting lasted 50 minutes, twice the planned duration. Occasionally, an aide would enter the room to remind the president that it was time to go with his guest into the Oval Office, saying that the media was waiting. Biden preferred to continue with the one-on-one meeting. What does that mean? Not much. Perhaps Biden needed more time to form an opinion about the young prime minister from Israel; perhaps he wanted to get a better sense of what Bennett intends to do on the Iranian issue; perhaps he was tired of large group meetings.**

- Before his meeting with Bennett, the president sat down to meet with a large group of generals to hold another discussion about the situation in Afghanistan. Every Israeli prime minister develops a personal relationship with the president in the White House. For better and for worse, that is the fate of every small, opinionated and scrappy satellite country. There was Jimmy Carter, who despised Menachem Begin; George Bush Sr. became angry with Yitzhak Shamir and punished him, but also admired him. There was Clinton, who had a terrible first meeting with Rabin on the eve of his election as president, but who subsequently developed a relationship of trust that was compared to the relationship between an uncle and his nephew, between an older brother, Rabin, and his younger brother. There was also George Bush Jr. who admired Ariel Sharon as a war hero and as an icon. He then came to view Ehud Olmert as a friend, a buddy. When I interviewed Bush towards the end of his term, he proudly showed me a picture that he took with Olmert; they were standing back-to-back to see who was taller. That picture hung in the corridor, on the way to the Oval Office.
- And there was also Netanyahu, who was viewed by two Democratic presidents, Clinton and Obama, as someone who had a combination of being too American while having too much Israeli chutzpah; they couldn't work with him and couldn't work without him. And Donald Trump, who entrusted his Middle Eastern policy in Netanyahu's hands—anything you please except war—and ended on a bitter, angry note. From Trump's perspective, anyone who recognized the results of the American presidential elections is an ingrate, a traitor and an opportunist. Has Biden embraced Bennett? Does he think highly of him on a personal level? I couldn't say. One thing that is certain is that the Biden administration wants to invest in the current government. The Israeli government is important to the administration, both as a partner for peace efforts in the Middle East and as a potential troublemaker, which needs to be kept close. Biden lives and breathes politics. He keenly understands what it means to live in a fragile coalition with lots of fringe elements.
- The Palestinian issue is a good example. In the preparatory talks that were held ahead of the meeting, Bennett's aides did their best to make it clear to the Biden administration why it was important that they restrain as much as possible their criticism of Israeli policies in the West Bank in all that pertains to issues such as civilian casualties, demolishing terrorists' homes, land expropriations and settlement expansion. Every American complaint would only create pressure on the left wing of the Israeli government—Horowitz, Michaeli and their colleagues (Meretz & Labor). Veteran party members would begin to call them on the telephone to ask: what, are you more right wing than the American president? The outcome would be a coalition crisis.
- That is why the criticism of Israel's policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians was low-key, nothing more than lip service that was paid to the left wing in the Democratic Party. The White House reiterated Biden's support for the two-state solution and called on Israel to refrain from taking steps that might contribute to the sense of unfairness and undermine efforts to build trust. In practice, the Biden administration is not going to fight Bennett's policy of maintaining the status quo. The consulate in Jerusalem, which effectively functions as the American embassy in Palestine, which the administration publicly announced would resume activity, is not going to be reopened anytime soon.

- It will be drowned in diplomatic equivocations. There are other issues that require attention: Israeli-Chinese relations, for example. The criticism of Israel was low-key and restrained but was not absent. There is also Qatar's involvement in the process with the Palestinians. Bennett, who takes a dim view of the funds that Qatar provides to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and the damage that Al Jazeera causes to Israel, would prefer to forgo the Qataris' services in Gaza. He has not been able to do that yet. And the American withdrawals from Iraq and Syria are also going to continue, notwithstanding Bennett's explanations to Biden about how bad and dangerous that was for the region.
- The big question between Israel and the administration is Iran. Bennett is returning to Israel without any major tidings—or, if there are any major tidings on that front they have been kept a secret, as part of the one-on-one meeting that he held with Biden. Biden and Bennett said publicly that they would not let Iran acquire nuclear weapons. Biden added: "We're going to put diplomacy first and see where that takes us. But if diplomacy fails, we're ready to turn to other options." Bennett wanted to hear in that sentence Biden's willingness to order American military action, either in cooperation with Israel or without it, and possibly also a pledge of American support if and when the limited war that is currently being fought out between Israel and Iran were to escalate. Netanyahu believed that the combination of American economic sanctions and covert operations would precipitate the Iranian regime's collapse. He was wrong. His policy effectively accelerated Iran's progress towards the bomb. Bennett is a believer in a surfeit of Israeli and American actions against Iran that will wear it down and curb its progress towards nuclear capability. Not a single decisive blow, and without drama: tiny cuts. In the end either the nobleman will die or his dog will die [an allusion to a Jewish parable].
- Is that what will stop Iran from going nuclear? It is hard to see how. The Iranians realize that the military option isn't really on the table. They are on the way to becoming a nuclear threshold state, with all the immunity that that status has bought countries such as Pakistan and North Korea. Netanyahu's name, so said a senior source in Bennett's entourage, never came up during the meeting in the White House. Netanyahu, like Lord Voldemort in the Harry Potter books, is the bad man who shall not be named. Netanyahu's defiant policies during Obama's term in office and his reliance on the Republicans and Trump left open wounds. Bennett promised a change: coordination instead of clashes; an effort to reach quiet understandings instead of criticizing. The White House had been hoping for a conciliatory Israeli government.
- The question is whether the two sides will keep their promises when the time comes for making decisions. Bennett is now taking his first steps as prime minister. He is receptive and has good intentions. At the Sabbath meal that was held for his entourage that was besieged in the hotel, he gave a brief Dvar Torah [a religiously-themed talk]. He quoted a verse from the Book of Psalms, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." "There is one interpretation that says that the fear isn't of something external but fear that I might become evil," said Bennett. "In political life it is very easy to confuse the ends with the means, to think that power is the purpose itself," he said. "Our job is to remember that we aren't perfect. No one is perfect." Wise words.

Heading Home with a Full Basket

By Ben Caspit

- Naftali Bennett's most important task in Washington was to score points on the personal level, to create good chemistry with President Biden, to become buddies with him. The model he was trying to follow was that of Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert with George W. Bush. Sharon enjoyed the aura of a general that the president admired. Olmert was able to form a personal connection with Bush and the two men enjoyed a unique sense of trust. In the case of Bennett and Biden, the task at hand is not a simple one. How does a 49-year-old, religious, conservative prime minister connect with a 78-year-old liberal-democratic president? It is too early to tell, but there are clear signs that the goal was accomplished. The first stage—creating personal chemistry—was successful. It was Biden who broke the ice when he introduced Bennett as “my friend” after the two leaders entered the Oval Office to make a joint statement. This occurred following a one-on-one meeting in the kitchenette adjoining the Oval Office (to date, Biden has invited just two people—the leaders of Japan and South Korea—to have coffee in his private kitchen).
- Even more important was what Biden told Bennett during the meeting that included more participants: Biden told Bennett to feel free to call if he needed anything. “Don't wait, just pick up the phone.” This is precisely what Biden did the previous day, after their meeting was postponed following the terror attack in Afghanistan. He called Bennett's personal mobile phone, praised him for being a “gentleman” and rescheduled the meeting. When the enormity of the attack became clear the Israelis adopted the same line, telling their American counterparts to [first deal with the aftermath of the attack] and that [the Israeli delegation] would spend the weekend in Washington [in order to have the meeting whenever it became possible for Biden]. Now, the trick will be to maintain and strengthen this connection, to turn it into a true relationship that will grow roots and will help both sides win out over the crises that haven't yet surfaced, but they are sure to surface. Much depends on Bennet; more than a little depends on Biden.
- Let's see how things pan out. Many people have been working on this for a long time: Bennett's staff, headed by Shimrit Meir and Dr. Eyal Hulata, and Biden's team, from National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan to Secretary of State Antony Blinken. The common denominator: They all genuinely want this to happen and to succeed. We don't yet know if they will succeed. So, Bennett can place a big, red check mark next to the primary goal he came to Washington to accomplish. A personal connection has been created; a declaration [from the Americans] on the Iran issue has, too, in a big way. To date, Biden has taken care to say only that Iran would not obtain a nuclear weapon “on my watch.” He upgraded this to “never.” In addition, he also hinted for the first time at a military option, referring to “other options” if diplomacy fails. Bennett's staff did not expect any more than that. It's not that there are no more disagreements. The Americans would still like to get back to the nuclear agreement, whereas Israel said doing so was a bad idea.

- The small difference, which is an enormous difference, is that there is not going to be a war. Israel will not declare a holy war against the American administration, even if the JCPOA is re-signed. [Bennett will] stress Israel's position, he will stress Israel's freedom to act independently, he will try to get as many assurances and compensation as possible but he will not butt heads with the president the way our previous prime minister did when he butted heads with President Obama but wound up breaking his own head: The deal was signed, Israel was thrown under the bus and wound up with nothing in return.
- Other goals for the trip were also accomplished: A billion dollars to stock up on Iron Dome missiles, which had been held up for months, was released with the president's approval. The Palestinian issue was sidelined, taking the penultimate spot in the Americans' briefing about the meeting. Waiving visa requirements for Israeli tourists visiting the United States finally won the president's support. That subject has been on the table for many years; now the Commander-in-Chief has issued a directive. There is apparently a good chance it will happen. Bennett returns to Israel with a full basket. That is the result of detailed preparations and a sincere desire on both sides to turn a new page. It will take the administration a lot more time to forget the years of Netanyahu, who tried to fire political shots at the president from his back yard [a reference to Netanyahu's 2015 address to Congress in which he denounced the JCPOA as a "very bad deal"]. They had been hoping for a prime minister that would work with them, not against them. They understood that Bennett is a partner. The principles that have always undergirded Israel-US relations, and which were trampled on while Obama was in power, returned to their glory gays. Dirty laundry is not aired in public; neither side surprises the other in public (this does not refer to military action); everything is planned in advance.
- Bennett's staff went with an interesting strategy: Instead of opening the [visit to Washington] with the meeting with the president and then "stepping down" to meet with the secretaries of defense and state, and with the national security adviser, they went in the opposite direction. First, the prime minister met with Blinken, Austin and Sullivan, and only then moved on to meet with the boss. That allowed Biden to be briefed in advance and to know exactly whom he would be meeting. The briefings he got were music to his ears. Bennett successfully highlighted his universalist side during the meetings, and downplayed his conservative, radical-right wing side. He didn't have to give anything up. This was prepared, down to the last detail. The Americans found in Bennett a man with an open mind, who was prepared to talk about anything, both in very general terms and also displayed impressive knowledge of small details.
- That's the way it was on the Iran issue; that's the way it was on the coronavirus pandemic. "He came with an open mind, he was prepared to listen, he was prepared to try to understand, he is great with details and very sure of himself," said one American official to a prominent Jewish American leader following the meetings with Bennett. "The Americans were impressed by this. In contrast to his predecessor, he not only made his views heard but he also listened, and not only because he was being polite." After all this has been written and said, everything hinges on Iran. On this topic, most of the story is still ahead of us. Sources close to Bennett believe that the next month will be dramatic.

The Americans still want to go back to the nuclear deal. The Iranians apparently do not. If it does not happen in September-October, it's hard to imagine that it's going to happen at all because it will begin to become pointless. In this context Bennett presented Biden with a strategy he scripted to rein in Iran; Bennett calls the strategy Death by a Thousand Cuts. It is not yet clear if this will take off or what, exactly, the Americans will do if it becomes clear that the JCPOA is well and truly dead. The only ray of hope is the flow of furious reactions that flowed from Iran, from the Supreme Leader down, following the joint Israeli/American declaration. If they are furious, we can be pleased. We cannot end without mentioning the Bibi Fan Club: It would have been hard to be more nauseated than by the sounds of joy emanating from these sewers when the extent of the tragedy in Kabul became clear because of their assumption that the attack had "screwed up" the Biden Bennett meeting. These people have lost any sense of shame, have lost any sense of ethics and have absolutely no limits.

- The attempts to contrast Bennett's trip to Washington to the "respect" that Netanyahu got from Washington, the screaming about violating the Sabbath — all these make it abundantly clear that we are dealing with a cult that is losing any semblance of sanity, right in front of our eyes. In hindsight, the terrible event in Afghanistan did not screw up the meeting in Washington, but to the contrary. In a twist of fate it gave Bennett an opportunity to make a good will gesture to the Americans (the White House made it clear that if Bennett were to announce that he could stay the weekend, the meeting would be held)—a good will gesture that Biden appreciated and which helped break the ice. The media's interest in the meeting also increased as a result of the circumstances. At the end of the day, and in complete contrast to the obscene shouts of joy emanating from the Bibi Fan Club, this weekend Bennett enjoyed "the assistance of Heaven." And this is before we even begin talking about signs that we have gained control over the fourth wave of the coronavirus, which potentially indicates that the brave decision to go with a third booster shot without shutting down the economy was the correct move to make.