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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

August 31, 2021

Arutz Sheva

Dichter Says He'll Challenge Netanyahu for Leadership

Former Shin Bet chief MK Avi Dichter announced that he will run against Benjamin [Netanyahu](#) for the Likud leadership as soon as primaries are announced in the party. A poll conducted for Channel 12 asked whether in its opinion the Netanyahu era as head of the Likud was over. 56% of respondents answered no and 34% answered yes. Among right-wing voters, Netanyahu's status is stronger: 71% of respondents think his time as Likud leader is not over and 22%, about one-fifth of right-wing voters, think that the [Netanyahu](#) era is over. As for the question of who should replace Netanyahu once he is no longer leading the party, 31% answered Nir Barkat, 12% said Miri Regev, 9% said Avi Dichter, 6% said Yuli Edelstein, 5% replied Yisrael Katz and 3% answered Tzachi Hanegbi. [Dig Deeper "Justice Minister SA'AR Begins Drafting Prime Minister's Term Limit Bill" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Times of Israel

Right-Wing Ministers Rankled by Gantz Meeting with Abbas

Defense Minister Benny Gantz was criticized by some of his coalition partners for meeting with Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas. Justice Minister Gideon Sa'ar and Communications Minister Yoaz Hendel, both of the right-wing New Hope party, each made public comments questioning the need to meet with Abbas, while media reports quoted a government source suggesting Gantz could be purposefully trying to bring down the government. The criticism of the meeting, the first high-level face-to-face discussion between the sides in over a decade, underlined the political tightrope demanded by Israel's poly-partisan cabinet on fractious diplomatic matters, especially regarding the Palestinians. The government, headed by nationalist leader [Naftali Bennett](#), includes parties from both the far right and far left of the political spectrum, and leaders have made clear that it will not have the political capital to pursue a restart of talks with the Palestinians.

Ha'aretz

Gantz: Agreed with Abbas on Confidence-Building Measures

Defense Minister Gantz and Palestinian President Abbas have agreed to several steps aimed at easing the PA's financial woes and improving security coordination with [Israel](#), Gantz said. The two agreed to grant residency rights to thousands of people living in the West Bank with no legal status. They also agreed that Israel will give the PA \$155m as an advance on the taxes Israel collects on the PA's behalf. Gantz said the people to be granted residency rights in the West Bank will include both Palestinians from the Gaza Strip and people from other countries who are married to West Bank residents. Gantz also reiterated the government's promise to issue permits for another 15,000 Palestinians to work in Israel. In addition, he agreed that Israel would issue 1,000 construction permits for Palestinian residents of Area C, the part of the West Bank that the Oslo Accords assigned to full Israeli control. [Dig Deeper "Gantz-Abbas Meeting Irks Right, Hamas Alike" \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

Israeli Soldier Wounded in Gaza Border Clashes Dies

The Israeli soldier critically wounded during violent riots on the Gaza border last week succumbed to his wounds, passing away at age 21, hospital officials said. Soroka Medical Center, where Border Police Staff Sergeant Barel Hadaria Shmueli was hospitalized, said that despite a number of life-saving surgeries, doctors had no choice but to pronounce his death. Shmueli was wounded on August 21 when a Hamas operative shot him in the head with a pistol from point-blank range using a gap in the border wall. He was promptly taken to Soroka's intensive care unit where he underwent several surgeries. [Thousands](#) of people participated last week in a mas Selichot Prayer - usually held in synagogues before the High Holidays and on fast days - outside the hospital to pray for Shmueli's recovery. [Dig Deeper "IDF Chief Threatens Response as Gazans Riot on Border for 3rd Night" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Israel Working to Strengthen Capabilities for Plan B on Iran

With negotiations regarding Iran's nuclear program stalled, Israel is working to strengthen its capabilities against the Islamic Republic, Defense Minister Gantz said. "We are allocating resources to strengthen our capabilities in the face of the challenges in the region, especially Iran," he told military reporters. Gantz's comments came hours after Prime Minister [Bennett](#) landed back in Israel following his first meeting with President Joe Biden in Washington. Iran was a central topic of the meeting between the two leaders. Though the US and Israel share intelligence – and cooperation between the two allies is increasing following Israel's move to CENTCOM's area of responsibility – Gantz said that if there is no deal, "we are working to define what Plan B is and start other actions as President Biden said." According to Gantz, a nuclear Iran would lead to a regional arms race that would be a danger to the entire world. IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Aviv Kohavi also told reporters last week that Israel's military is accelerating its operational plans against Iran due to the progress of its nuclear program.

Associated Press

Qatar Emerges as Key Player in Afghanistan after US Pullout

Qatar played an outsized role in US efforts to evacuate tens of thousands of people from Afghanistan. Now the tiny Gulf Arab state is being asked to help shape what is next for Afghanistan because of its ties with both Washington and the Taliban, who are in charge in Kabul. Qatar will be among global heavyweights when Secretary of State Antony Blinken hosts a virtual meeting to discuss a coordinated approach for the days ahead, as the US completes its withdrawal from Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover of the country. The meeting will also include Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, Turkey, the European Union and NATO. Qatar is also in talks about providing civilian technical assistance to the Taliban at Kabul's international airport. The energy-rich nation is a tiny country with a little more than 300,000 citizens, where expatriate foreign workers on temporary visas far outnumber the local population. [Dig Deeper "Qatar Stepping into Afghan Vacuum Left by US Withdrawal" \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

Turkey Won't Accept 'Refugee Burden' from Afghanistan

Turkey cannot accept the influx of migrants fleeing Afghanistan, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu warned, as foreign governments scrambled to evacuate their citizens and at-risk Afghans from the Taliban-run country. Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees worldwide, including more than 3.7 million registered Syrians who were granted protection from their decade-long civil war. At more than 300,000, Afghans already make up Turkey's second-largest refugee population. Since 2016 the European Union has provided billions of euros in exchange for Ankara preventing Europe-bound refugees from leaving Turkey's borders. But in recent years, public attitudes toward refugees have soured in Turkey. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan assured the public, "Turkey does not have any obligation whatsoever to be a safe haven for Afghan refugees." The Taliban have reportedly requested Turkey's help operating Hamid Karzai International Airport in the capital city. Turkey, which is NATO's only Muslim-majority member, is still weighing the request. Erdogan said Sunday that his country will maintain a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan but cast doubt over the Taliban's airport proposal.

US Forces Leave Afghanistan after Nearly 20 Years

The United States completed the withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan, ending 20 years of war that culminated in the militant Taliban's return to power. Washington and its NATO allies were forced into a hasty exit. Following a chaotic evacuation, they leave behind thousands of Afghans who helped Western countries and might have qualified for evacuation. Celebratory gunfire rang out in Kabul after completion of the US pullout that ended America's longest war. Taliban spokesman Qari Yusuf said: "The last US soldier has left Kabul airport and our country gained complete independence," Al Jazeera reported. President Joe Biden said in a statement after the withdrawal that the world would hold the Taliban to their commitment to allow safe passage for those to want to leave Afghanistan. The operation was completed before the August 31 deadline set by Biden, who has drawn heavy criticism from both Democrats and Republicans for his handling of Afghanistan since the Taliban took over Kabul earlier this month after a lightning advance. [Dig Deeper "Longest War's Cost: Thousands of Lives, Trillions of Dollars" \(Associated Press\)](#)

A Disaster Named Stalemate

By Ben-Dror Yemini

- Prime Minister **Natali Bennett** could take the liberty of saying that he is opposed to a Palestinian state. He ran right past **Binyamin Netanyahu**, and the spin masters didn't even break a sweat. To the contrary. He was accepted [in Washington] as a friend, as a member of the club. Washington was thrilled, not only that finally— finally!— there was an Israeli Prime Minister not named Netanyahu. That was only a small part of the story. Bennett's statement was received with a yawn mainly because the Palestinian Authority has managed to relegate itself to irrelevance. On one hand, the PA continues its security collaboration with Israel—not, as it often seems to us in order to protect Israel or the settlers—but to protect the PA itself against Hamas. On the other hand, nothing at all is happening on the diplomatic front.
- After two decades of stubborn refusal to consider any peace initiative—Trump was not the one who made them irrelevant and neither was Netanyahu—they did this to themselves. After negotiations with then-Prime Minister **Ehud Olmert** [broke down] in 2008, and again after negotiations with Netanyahu [collapsed] in 2014, they bragged about the fact that they said no. As the late **Saeb Erekat** told the Jordanian **Ad-Dustour** newspaper, “At camp David we got 90% and Olmert offered 100%, so what are we running for?” True, there are always good-willed Israelis around, absolutely committed Zionists, people like **Dr. Saul Arieli**, who delude themselves into thinking that if they would only just give a little bit more, if only we would be a bit more flexible—peace would break out here.
- This is no ordinary act of deception; it is an act of self-deception. Peace is not at hand. The longer that “moderate” Palestinian factions remain committed to rejectionism, Islamist parties like Hamas will only get stronger. From time to time there may be a Palestinian majority that might be willing to consider accepting a two-states-for-two-peoples solution, but the leadership, steadily and systematically, has rejected this solution. It is not just a majority of Israelis who are sick and tired of the Palestinians. The Arab states are as well. Palestinian rejectionism is one of the causes—and it isn't only one—that led to the Abraham Accords. Saudi prince **Bandar bin Sultan**, who served as his country's ambassador to Washington and is a close personal friend of **Bill Clinton**, explained the subject in a long, detailed interview to **Al-Arabiya**. He was there, he knows, he is well acquainted with the history of Palestinian rejectionism.
- This rejectionism is a terrific gift to the proponents of a single large state. This rejectionism is a terrible blow to the camp that wants a Jewish and democratic country rather than a bi-national state. The question is what now? Because while others can afford to forget the Palestinian issue, Israel cannot. The Palestinians are not going anywhere; they are just over the border. Tens of thousands want to become Israeli citizens, now that the citizenship bill was defeated. There are hundreds of thousands more waiting in line. And millions more—yes, millions—who know that an Israeli annexation would mean the end of the Zionist dream.

- In the meanwhile, there hasn't been any [formal] annexation, but there has been a creeping annexation. An annexation under some sort of collective anesthesia. So Zionist, national, Jewish democratic Israel has no reason to celebrate. Israel is the side that needs to present an alternative to the existing situation. True, there is no way to create a Palestinian state or to withdraw from Judea and Samaria because, hey, withdrawal here would necessarily lead to precisely what happened in Lebanon and in Afghanistan. Hizbullah took over, the Taliban took over, and Hamas will take over, too. On the other hand, annexation is not an answer either. Demographically, it would be a disaster. Defense Minister Benny Gantz visited Ramallah the other day to solve several burning issues, and to ease pressure on the PA. The sides agreed, among other things, to upgrade the legal standing of thousands of Palestinians living inside Israeli territory.
- This means they will become permanent residents, and eventually they will be entitled to Israeli citizenship. And if not them —then certainly their children. This is no reason for celebration. The issue is that as long as Israel fails to initiate an agreement, then two-sided annexation is going to proceed. More building in the settlements located far from the Green Line, more and more Palestinian “family reunifications” on the Israeli side of the Green Line. There is no need for even a single shot to be fired, or for even one terror attack to be committed for us to take a path towards suicide—we are doing it to ourselves. We have to wake up. We need an agreement that includes security control as well as demographic separation, even if complete separation is impossible. It wouldn't be the best possible solution, it would by far be the least bad. But we are celebrating the fact that that the Palestinian problem has slipped off the agenda. What delusion. What blindness.

The Inquiry That Could Restore the Public's Trust

By Yossi Yehoshua

- **Before we get into Israel's confused strategy vis-à-vis the Palestinians we must first discuss an incident that ought to have been a localized, tactical incident—the death of IDF soldier Barel Hadarya-Shmueli at the hands of a Hamas activist who shot him at point-blank range on the border fence. That incident, which was documented on film, has become a strategic and iconic national incident that obliges the IDF not only to change the way it operates along the border and to review the rules of engagement, but also to present the findings of an investigation into the incident to the bereaved family, of course, but also to the citizens of this country and to future combat soldiers and their families.**
- **IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi addressed the issue of public confidence in the IDF in a speech he gave at a naval base. He was responding to criticism about the military's demand to increase pensions for career soldiers, but this crisis of faith is much more serious. One need only peek at social media sites to see the protests by combat soldiers who feel the military is “tying their hands.” Whether or not they are correct, or partly correct, this has had an impact on their friends' motivation to serve [in combat roles] in the army and on their parents' [motivation] to send their children to combat units. Meetings with senior military officials over the past week show that they do not realize just how critical this incident was. In order to shut it down quickly we need the army to be completely transparent in presenting the findings.**
- **Then the people who should take responsibility must do so. It is likely that after the investigation findings are presented to the chief of staff next week, they will be published—including personal recommendations [i.e. pinning responsibility on specific individuals]. The family's demanded that IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi appoint a military commission of inquiry to investigate operational failures surrounding the incident. “The family will not suffice with findings that place the blame for the incident on sentries alone,” [i.e. lay the blame with low-ranking soldiers instead of on high-ranking officers] their letter read. Chief of Staff Kochavi addressed the unprecedented situation that the IDF finds itself in today. “There are six theaters of operations at the same time.” For that reason, public confidence is critical, as is the army's readiness for a multi-front war. This past weekend was a circus over Prime Minister Bennett's meeting with President Joe Biden and over [the US's agreement to provide funding to replenish Israel's Iron Dome [interceptor missiles].**
- **On this point, it should be noted that the “agreement” was actually the final stage in a deal that had been secured several weeks earlier by Defense Minister Benny Gantz. Even more importantly, the deal is not sufficient for [the number of Iron Dome missiles] Israel will need during a two-front war against Hamas and Hizbullah. One very senior IDF official said Israel must equip itself—and do so quickly—with a much larger store of [Iron Dome] batteries and missiles and deploy air defense systems in northern Israel, from Tel Aviv to Metulla.**

- Despite official declarations by Israeli officials, military professionals believe the process of [stockpiling defense systems] needs to be much faster, even if the money comes out of the IDF operating budget rather than from American aid money. On a different front, Defense Minister Benny Gantz met with Palestinian Authority Chairman Abu Mazen in Ramallah. From the standpoint of the security establishment this was an important visit that should have taken place a long time ago in order to reinforce the PA and its security apparatuses versus Hamas and in the face of the increasingly lawless northern Samaria region, especially Jenin. It is in Israel's interest that the PA be strong enough to prevent terror attacks and to help the IDF with the nightly arrests in makes in West Bank cities.
- The nighttime meeting in Ramallah ended with Israel's agreement to ease up on a range of issues, with Gantz's approval: A half-billion shekel loan to the PA; permission for the PA to legalize the status of some 3,000 Palestinians who do not have PA identity cards, including individuals who live in caves throughout Judea and Samaria, Gazans who fled Gaza after Hamas took over the Strip in 2007 and Palestinians who have lived abroad for decades and have lost their legal standing here. Gantz also approved Palestinian construction plans in Area C, but mainly in existing Palestinian villages and towns. "The stronger the Palestinian Authority is, the weaker Hamas will be, and the more governance [i.e. control] it has, the more security there will be, and the less we will have to operate," Gantz said after becoming the most senior Israeli official to meet Abu Mazen in 11 years. Still: Despite Prime Minister Bennett's stamp of approval for the meeting he was quick to stress: There is no political process vis-à-vis the Palestinians, nor will there be one.
- Apparently Gantz is counting on the day after Bennett, whose hands are tied by the right in all that pertains to improving ties with the PA. Under those circumstances, Israel's strategy is not clear. Vis-à-vis Hamas Gantz and Bennett have adopted a strategy that has never been tested in times of crisis or when facing a serious dilemma: They want an agreement and are prepared to pay for one in far-reaching economic gestures. The disagreements between them will surface over the cost Israel is willing to pay as part of a deal to win the POW's release.