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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

September 10, 2021

Jerusalem Post

Palestinians-IDF Clash; Police Declare High Alert

Violent riots resumed across the West Bank, in Bethlehem, Jenin, Hebron, Kalkilya, Etzion and Nablus, Israeli media reported, in a repeat of the hundred-protestors-strong riots in [solidarity](#) with the six escaped Palestinian prisoners from Gilboa prison. In light of the [rising tensions](#) and the manhunt still underway for the escapees, police announced a state of Level 2 alert - one before the highest level - preparing to secure gatherings during the Friday prayers, N12 reported. The police are getting ready to revert of a state of emergency if the need arises, according to the report. Palestinians have been rioting and celebrating the Gilboa escape and have declared a Day of Rage after the Friday prayers. [Dig Deeper "Theater Kid Turned Militant Stars in Israeli Prison Break" \(Associated Press\)](#)

Israel Hayom

Guards to Face Criminal Probe over Prison Break

Authorities investigating will summon prison guards for questioning under caution over their alleged misconduct in the run-up to the Gilboa Prison jailbreak, a [maximum-security](#) prison on Monday. Investigators are increasingly leaning toward the view that the prison break could not have happened without guards shirking their duties or agreeing to various requests by the prisoners that made this possible, although at this point there is no indication of any deliberate complicity in the incident on the part of guards. The prison guard in the nearby watchtower was asleep when the prisoners escaped and the man in the control room who was supposed to be watching the screens that give a real-time view of the perimeter was not properly doing his job, according to reports. It also transpired that the prisoners spent more than 20 minutes getting out of their cell through the underground tunnel they had excavated, without anyone noticing. Israel Prison Service (IPS) Commissioner Katy Perry said that she has "no plans" to step down over the Prison fiasco. [Dig Deeper "Commission of Inquiry to Investigate Terrorists' Prison Break" \(Arutz Sheva\)](#)

I24 News

Twitter Blocks Accounts of Far-Right Israeli Political Figures

Twitter blocked the accounts of far-right Israeli political activists Bentzi Gopstein and Baruch Marzel. Neither party was permitted to appeal this decision. Baruch Marzel heads the Jewish National Front party and has worked for the controversial Rabbi Meir Kahane in the past. Bentzi Gopstein is known for founding the Lehava organization. The two polarizing figures have been subject to sharp criticism in Israel over the course of several years for their extremist views. In response to the ban, far-right religious Zionist MP Itamar Ben-Gvir attacked Twitter for allowing "terrorist" accounts to remain open while blocking Israel's political figures. Bentzi Gopstein was indicted previously in 2019 on charges of inciting terrorism, violence and racism. In the same year, the two men were banned from running for the Knesset on the list of the Otzma Yehudit party, which is now led by Ben-Gvir.

Bennett: I Told the Americans We Would Not Stop Building

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett met with the heads of the Yesha Council. The meeting dealt with issues related to the development of the settlements in Judea and Samaria (West Bank) and the strengthening of local authorities in the area. It was agreed to continue working together to advance the issues. The meeting was attended by Yesha Council Chairman David Elhayani, Secretary General Amana CEO Zeev Hever, Yesha Council CEO Yigal Dilmoni and Yesha Council Deputy Chairman Matanya Shapira. This is the first official meeting between Bennett and settlement leaders since the inauguration of the new government. Bennett promised that construction would not stop but would continue at the same pace as in recent years. "I am committed to the settlements," the prime minister clarified. "There will be no construction freeze, but there will also be no annexation." [Dig Deeper "PM Meets Settler Heads, Said to Tell Them He Won't Freeze West Bank Construction" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Times of Israel

Biden Officials Privately Pushed PA to Shelve ICC Probe

Senior officials in the Biden administration have privately pressed the Palestinian Authority (PA) to walk back effort to have Israel tried for war crimes at the International Criminal Court (ICC), according to a Middle Eastern diplomatic official. Publicly, the United States has issued statements "firmly" opposing the ICC's March decision to probe alleged actions committed by Israel and Palestinian terror groups in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem since 2014. The Biden administration, like the previous one led by former President Donald Trump, maintains that the court does not have the jurisdiction to adjudicate the case because Israel, like the US, is not a signatory to the Rome Statute that established the ICC. Moreover, Washington maintains that there is no Palestinian sovereign state and therefore it shouldn't be granted membership at the ICC, nor be allowed to delegate jurisdiction to The Hague-based court. However, the Biden administration, in April, revoked Trump-era sanctions against Fatou Bensouda, the ICC prosecutor who initiated the investigation into the "Situation in Palestine,". [Dig Deeper "Report: PA Officials Urge ICC to Expedite Probe into Israeli 'Violations' \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

I24 News

Jordanian Court Upholds Convictions in Royal Plot

Jordan's highest appeal court upheld a guilty verdict against a former confidant of King Abdullah and a minor royal who were sentenced to 15 years in jail on charges of attempting to destabilize the monarchy. The cessation court said it confirmed evidence backing the sentence passed in July by a state security court against ex-royal court chief Bassem Awadallah, who played a big role in the drive to liberalize Jordan's economy, and Sherif Hassan Zaid, a distant relative of King Abdullah. The two were arrested in April when former heir to the throne Prince Hamza was placed under house arrest over allegations that he had plotted to destabilize Jordan. The ruling Hashemite family continues to play an important role in providing regional stability, recently agreeing with Egypt and Syria to supply gas and electricity to Lebanon which is facing fuel shortages caused by a deep economic crisis. [Dig Deeper "Israel's President Takes Lead on Ties with Jordan, Palestinians" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Lebanon to Start Paying Cash Aid to Poor Families

Lebanon's government said it will start paying cash assistance next month to hundreds of thousands of poor families - in US dollars - as the small nation sinks deeper into its economic crisis. Some 500,000 families will start receiving \$20 a month for every family member up to a maximum of six persons, Minister of Tourism and Social Affairs Ramzi Moucharafieh said during a news conference in Beirut. Moucharafieh said the payment will be made in US dollars or the equivalent in Lebanese pounds at the black-market rate. Economy and Trade Minister Raoul Nehme said the average payment for every family is expected to be about \$93. The move comes at a time when the government is planning to end subsidies on vital products such as fuel and some medicines that is widely expected to increase prices of most products. The plan for payments comes as the Lebanese currency has been on a free fall since the economic meltdown began in October 2019. The payment in US dollars would guarantee that the poor families will be protected in case the pound drops further in the future. The plan to end subsidies comes as the foreign currency reserves at the central bank have dropped dangerously low, from \$30b at the start of the crisis in late 2019, to about \$14b currently. [Dig Deeper "Inflationary Pressures Force Lebanese to Make Tough Choices" \(Reuters\)](#)

Reuters

Iranian, Qatari Ministers Meet amid Iran-US Tensions

Iran's foreign minister met his visiting counterpart from US-allied Qatar, state media reported, as Tehran and Washington appear to be at an impasse over the fate of talks to revive a 2015 nuclear deal. Iran warned Western states against rebuking it at the International Atomic Energy Agency after the UN atomic watchdog's latest reports criticized the country, while Secretary of State Antony Blinken said time was running out to revive the deal with world powers. Qatar's Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani was in Tehran days after Blinken visited the Gulf Arab state, which has good ties with Iran. In his talks with Sheikh Mohammed, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian called for boosting trade ties and reiterated Tehran's support for an Afghan government including all factions, Iranian state media reported, without referring to any talks about the nuclear negotiations. Indirect talks between President Joe Biden's administration and Iran on how both countries could return to compliance with the deal have not resumed since President Ebrahim Raisi, an anti-Western hardliner, took office on Aug. 5. Qatar has emerged as the main mediator between the Taliban, who swept into Kabul on Aug. 15, and Western countries following the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan. [Dig Deeper "Lapid in Moscow: Israel Will Defend Itself against Iran in Syria" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

All Eyes on Gaza

By Lior Lotan

- **The manhunt for the five Islamic Jihad prisoners and for Zakaria Zubeidi entails huge intelligence and operational efforts against the distinct security threat posed by the prisoners to Israeli society. The effort to catch prisoners trying to escape into Israeli territory relies on the special abilities that were developed by the intelligence organizations and by the IDF during the second Intifada to locate suicide terrorists making their way from the West Bank into Israel. The support that the escapees are getting are a big challenge to the troops—but also an opportunity. Every contact of the escapees with the world increases the chance of locating them. In such manhunts, the search does not mean only tracking their footsteps starting from the shaft from which they escaped. For now, a similar and distressing similarity is becoming apparent between the Prison Service’s treatment of security prisoners and Israeli policy toward the Hamas regime in Gaza.**
- **In both theaters, the supreme goal of Israeli policy is the same: quiet: in the Prison Service, this means quiet in the security prisoner wings; in Gaza, it means quiet towards rocket and mortar shell fire, to incendiary balloons and to nightly disturbances. In both theaters, Israel opts for the practical and ignores the psychological dimension. Israeli reticence that is translated immediately by the enemy as a psychological victory is viewed by Israel as of being of minor importance and as a small price to pay. What Israel perceives as concessions being a reflection of might, has a very simple name on the other side: threats work. Israel has no overall strategy toward Hamas in Gaza—and every security agency decides on its own and based on its own needs.**
- **The Prison Service’s decision to give or deny a security prisoner a perk is mainly based on wanting for there to be stability inside the prison and not on the impact that this will have on the thinking of the terrorist organizations to which these prisoners belong and on Israeli deterrence. The same is true for the IDF. We constantly make the same mistake in our understanding and our assessment of the enemy. Israel’s thinking is that because of the prisoners’ “status” in Palestinian society, how they are treated could cause instability outside. But in fact, the ethos that sanctifies the prisoners is more complex and is not one-dimensional. The prisoner is not considered merely “a son of the Palestinian people” but rather a soldier in captivity.**
- **A prisoner is a soldier in Allah’s army and he is meant to shoulder this burden on behalf of the Palestinian people. Not the other way around. When Israel fears to treat security prisoners strictly because of how this will affect the Palestinian street, Israel takes constraints on itself, it is deterred and concedes from the outset to potential pressure from the enemy. Israel also errs in its approach to Hamas in Gaza. We saw this clearly in the way that Operation Guardian of the Walls ended without the return of the MIAs and hostages, with the restoration, in practice, of the majority of the terms that were in place before the operation and without Israel gaining anything aside from quiet, and with the lack of any Israeli retaliation to the Hamas’s threats and frequent provocations, as if: if it**

doesn't shoot or blow up or burn—then it is insignificant. In her book *The March of Folly*, Barbara Tuchman states policy can be defined as folly if it meets three criteria: “It must have been perceived as counterproductive in its own time; a feasible alternative course of action must have been available; and, finally, the policies must have been those of a group, not an individual ruler, and should persist beyond any one political lifetime.” The incident of the escape from Gilboa Prison, and primarily the similarities between Prison Service policies vis-à-vis security prisoners and Israel's policy vis-à-vis Hamas, require us to take a keen look not only at the physical foundations of the other security prisons in Israel, but also at the foundations of our strategy toward Hamas.

The Road to Cairo

By Jacky Hugi

- **As we munch on our apples and honey and hope for an end to the pandemic a small diplomatic process has been unfolding behind the scenes. Well, perhaps “process” is a bit of an overstatement but something certainly is happening. Egypt is driving as hard as it can for a solution to Israel’s POWs and MIAs, and for the government in Jerusalem to show more flexibility than its predecessor. At the same time they are working to keep things quiet in Gaza. Towards that goal, an Egyptian delegation will visit Israel, Ramallah and Gaza next week. Earlier this week National Security Council head Eyal Hulata visited Cairo, mainly to pave the way for a visit by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. His meeting with Egyptian President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi was intended first and foremost to let them get to know one-another. The men had never met and the meeting was very important in terms of jumpstarting strategic collaboration between the capitals.**
- **Bennett has very big shoes to fill. Sisi gave a lot of credit to Bennett’s predecessor, Netanyahu, who visited Egypt secretly several times. Netanyahu’s close friendship with the Egyptian president led to many gains, most of which have remained in the dark. If Sisi and Bennett do indeed “click,” professionals on both sides will benefit. From there, both peoples might also benefit as well. Despite the fact that virtually nothing from the meeting will be made public, the meeting will be fascinating: Not only will it be a meeting between the leaders of two regional powers, but also between the representatives of two distinct worlds. Aside from a shared interest in maintaining security there is nothing to connect Sisi and Bennett on a personal level. Each represents a different political style, different political pressures, all of which leads to different needs. One carries on his shoulders a concern for 10 million Israelis; the other has a population ten times that to worry about. One fights a daily battle to ensure food security for his people, while the other—for their physical security.**
- **Both are members of ancient cultures, and despite the fact that one group emerged from the other thousands of years ago, they are as different as night and day. And we haven’t even spoken yet about the difference in age between Bennett and Sisi, which points to a disparity in experience. The Israeli prime minister is not yet 49; Sisi will turn 66 in November. That doesn’t ensure anything, either good or bad. At the end of the day the meeting’s success and the nature of the relationship that comes out of it depends on the two men establishing a rapport. Bennett will be coming into the meeting with a leadership handicap. Not necessarily because of the age gap, but because of the inexperience of Bennett’s security cabinet compared with all other players in the region. A quick overview of Israel’s diplomatic leadership shows that a solid majority lack diplomatic experience between Israel and its neighbors. Bennett himself may be a polished politician but he has not interacted with Arab leaders or with the heart of foreign relations. Among the people he is surrounded with there is not even one who could be called a “tribal elder,” and only one, two or possibly three people who could conceivably make up the difference.**

- **Foreign Minister Yair Lapid is also an experienced politician. When he was in the Knesset opposition he worked hard to create relationships with foreign leaders and statesmen. But diplomatic experience is not chalked up merely by friendly meetings, but rather under pressure, in uncertain situations and heavy pressure, both by the public and by decision makers. NSC Director Hulata rose through the ranks of the Mossad; in several jobs he certainly gained experience meeting with foreign colleagues. But Hulata is relatively young, 45, and it is not at all clear that he's fought enough in the political sandbox during his intelligence career. The only person in the group who has any diplomacy experience at all is Defense Minister Benny Gantz, and that is only because he served as the IDF Chief of Staff.**
- **In that role he came into contact with organizations and friendly security forces—in Arab countries, in Europe and in the United States. But it is not clear that he's got what it takes to lay the foundations of strong relationships with friendly Western and Arab governments; therefore, he has given Gantz a central role to play. The GSS, too, as well as the Mossad, both have several individuals with organizational memories, who have a clear understanding of our neighbors' needs and the language to speak to them in. But their numbers are declining, and it is questionable whether their views are being heard in Jerusalem.**
- **Political experience is not a slogan, it is an asset. The more experienced people there are in Jerusalem, the greater the self-confidence of the decision-makers who are at the top of the ladder and just below. A lack of experience is like not knowing a language. Just as a language is acquired through hard work and over the course of years, without shortcuts, so is experience in meetings between heads of state. An experienced team will know how to define the government's highest goal well. It will be personally acquainted with our friends, their problems and needs, and will know how to dispel tension with them and overcome problems. This is even more true in meetings with our Arab neighbors. With them, we have to know both what to say, and mainly, what not to say. We must know how to read between the lines, when to pressure and where, when to relent. Israelis usually talk too much around their Arab friends.**
- **They err in thinking that they've won them over, whereas they are being nice because they still haven't gotten what they want. Israelis remember very well what is important to us, and often, forget what is important to them. In contrast to the security cabinet in Jerusalem, the countries around us are run by rulers with a great deal of experience. Sitting next to Sisi in the larger meeting with Bennett will be Director of the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate Abbas Kamel, a veteran fox, the political clone of his master. The Egyptians have a keen eye and they discern very well the holes and the weaknesses of others and know how to exploit them. The same is true for other spheres. Abu Mazen, despite the PA's weakness, is a seasoned statesman, as is the team that surrounds him, without exception. In Jordan, at the top of the pyramid is a king with 22 years' experience in ruling, who since childhood has lived in the political machinations of the Arab world. And we still haven't mentioned the Persian Gulf leaders, also experienced and strong. The relative weakness at this time of some of our neighboring regimes could be misleading.**

- **People who take comfort in this weakness and who are counting on it, are liable to be surprised. Yahya Sinwar, who heads the ostensibly shakiest regime in the region, succeeded in the last few years in causing every Israeli to ponder the situation in Gaza, and to force some of us to run in panic to the shelters. When Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat met, there were many gaps between them. How many points of convergence could there be between a Jew from the generation of the Holocaust, born in Brisk, Poland, and the son of farmers from a village in the Nile delta. Begin's main political experience was from his many years in the opposition, far from the apex of the pyramid. Sadat, in contrast, had been in politics since his teens. When his plane landed in Lod in November 1977, he had been president for seven years, been through one war as president, gone through a military failure as vice president, had been partner in a successful coup and had thousands of hours of high-level meetings under his belt. Begin was aware of his inferiority and covered for it with wisdom and humility. He surrounded himself with a ring of experienced and knowledgeable advisers, he listened and contrary to all expectations, led Israel to one of its greatest achievements in history. An Irgun fighter and an Egyptian revolutionary changed the face of the Middle East.**