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Israel and Middle East News Update

Tuesday, September 14

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News Excerpts

September 14, 2021

Times of Israel

Blue and White, Labor Mulling Future Merger, Officials Say

Senior officials in Labor and in the Blue & White party have said they see a future unification of the two parties as a mutually beneficial move, according to a report from Zman Israel. Several politicians from the parties indicated that they see the merger as a natural alliance, even if it is not likely to happen in the near future. One Labor official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the joining of forces would be “great for everyone.” According to the official, the party seeks to appeal to a broader spectrum of voters, and a union with Blue & White, which is led by Defense Minister Benny Gantz, will enable this. Ministers, lawmakers, activists, and voters in both parties see no significant ideological differences between Labor and Blue & White, though some in Gantz’s party are uncomfortable with some of Labor’s more dovish views. [Dig Deeper “State Budget Set to Pass Unanimously Due to Likud Boycott” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Ynet News

Israeli Soldiers Foil Stabbing Attack at West Bank Junction

The Israeli military said it foiled an attempted stabbing attack at a junction in the West Bank. The IDF Spokesperson's Unit said the alleged Palestinian assailant was shot and injured attempting to stab IDF soldiers stationed at Gush Etzion Junction. The suspect, identified as 27-years-old Muhammad Bilu from the West Bank village of Beit Fajjar, was taken to Jerusalem’s Shaare Zedek Medical Center in moderate-severe condition. No other casualties were reported in the incident. Tensions have been rising in the West Bank in recent days following the escape of six Palestinian inmates from Gilboa Prison last week, the subsequent capture of **four** of them, and the continued manhunt for the last two fugitives, one of whom is believed to be hiding in the Palestinian territories. [Dig Deeper “Back-to-Back Stabbing Attacks Spark Baseless Row over Ending West Bank Closure” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Times of Israel

Israel Braces for Escalation, with Major Attack Said Foiled

Israeli security forces foiled a major attack this week, as Palestinian terror groups sought to step up violence in solidarity with six escaped prisoners, Hebrew media reported. The Shin Bet security service and police foiled a number of attacks, Channel 12 and 13 reported, without giving details on the major attack prevented. Meanwhile, police were going on high alert, fearing further violence over the Yom Kippur holiday, particularly in Jerusalem. Channel 13 reported that some 2,000 police would be stationed in the city. “I don’t know if we are on the verge of an escalation,” Public Security Minister Omer Barlev told the Kan public broadcaster. “But we are definitely in a very sensitive period — the recent attacks, the escape of the terrorists from the prison and the two who have not yet been caught, alongside our problems with Hamas. [Dig Deeper “ Hamas Says ‘Heroic’ Stabbing Inspired by Jailbreak, Threatens Escalation” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Leaders of Egypt and Israel Hold Rare Public Meeting

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett became the first Israeli prime minister in 11 years to pay an official visit to an Egyptian president meeting Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Sharm el-Sheikh. This was an effort by Sisi to establish good relations with the new Israeli government, and the Egyptians made every effort to give Bennett an unusually warm and public welcome. When Bennett and his advisers arrived at the presidential compound, they were surprised to see the Israeli flag next to the Egyptian flag. Israeli officials speculate that by inviting Bennett publicly, Sisi is trying to signal to the Biden administration Egypt's importance in the region. The main issue discussed was the situation in the Gaza Strip. Sisi told Bennett the calm in Gaza must be maintained and that the international community needs to support Egypt's reconstruction efforts. Bennett told Sisi that Egypt has to strengthen inspections at the border crossing between Egypt and Gaza in order to prevent the smuggling of dual-use materials that can allow Hamas to rebuild its military capabilities, an Israeli official said. [Dig Deeper "With Eyes Set on Washington, Sisi Seeks Role of Peacemaker"](#) (Jerusalem Post)

PA, Hamas Slam Lapid's Plan for Gaza Reconstruction

The [Palestinian Authority](#) (PA) and Hamas slammed Foreign Minister Yair Lapid's remarks that Gaza could be handed economic projects in exchange for a quiescent Hamas. "The enemy has resorted to various proposals in order to weaken the resistance, and they did not succeed. Its resort to such a plan indicates its inability to deal with the resistance and our Palestinian people," said Hamas spokesperson Hazim Qasim. In remarks delivered to the Palestinian cabinet, however, PA Prime Minister [Mohammad Shtayyeh](#) pans the proposal. "Gaza's problem is political. It is the same problem that all of Palestine faces, including Jerusalem. There must be a serious political process based in international law, to end the occupation and lift the blockade. This would make the reconstruction of Gaza possible and sustainable," Shtayyeh said. Lapid proposed a two-stage plan in Gaza to end the enclave's ongoing humanitarian crisis and weaken Hamas. Both stages would see long-awaited reforms to Gaza's infrastructure, many of which have been on the table for years.

Israeli Firm Unveils Armed Robot to Patrol Volatile Borders

Israel's state-owned Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) unveiled a remote-controlled armed robot for the purpose of keeping troops out of harm's way during ground missions. The "REX MKII" unmanned vehicle has the capabilities to patrol battle zones, assist in evacuation efforts, track infiltrators and execute remote attacks against threats, according to IAI. The semi-autonomous machine was unveiled at DSEI 2021 in London, which claims to be the world's largest gathering of the defense and security community. The robot is reportedly the most advanced so far developed by IAI subsidiary ELTA Systems over the past 15 years. The Israeli military is currently using a similar but smaller unmanned platform called the "Jaguar" to patrol the border with the Gaza Strip. [Dig Deeper "Israel Hits Hamas Targets as Gaza Militants Fire Rockets"](#) (Associated Press)

Reuters

Iran Escapes Rebuke at IAEA

Western powers scrapped plans for a resolution criticizing Iran at the UN atomic watchdog after Tehran agreed to prolong monitoring of some nuclear activities, even though the watchdog said Iran made no "promise" on another key issue. The decision by the United States, France, Britain and Germany not to push for a resolution at this week's meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency's 35-nation Board of Governors avoids an escalation with Iran that could have killed hopes of resuming wider talks on reviving the Iran nuclear deal. Indirect talks between Iran and the United States stopped in June, days after hardliner Ebrahim Raisi was elected president of Iran. Western powers have called on Iran to return to negotiations, saying time is running out, while Raisi has said Iran is willing to, but without Western "pressure". During a last-minute visit to Tehran by IAEA chief Rafael Grossi, Iran agreed to grant his agency overdue access to its equipment in Iran that monitors some sensitive areas of its [nuclear program](#). Inspectors will swap out memory cards more than two weeks after they were due to be replaced. [Dig Deeper "IAEA 'Saves' Iran Nuke Negotiations?" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Associated Press

Lebanese President Wants to Resume Bailout Talks with IMF

Lebanon's new government held its first meeting with a call by the president to resume talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to help kick-start its recovery from one of the world's worst economic crises in more than a century. The 24-member Cabinet's most pressing mission over the coming weeks will be to help improve conditions in the country of 6 million, including a million Syrian refugees. More than half the population now lives in poverty amid extended power outages and severe shortages in fuel and medicine. President Michel Aoun told ministers during the Cabinet meeting that their government policy statement should include the resumption of talks with the IMF, which were suspended last year. He also called for a plan to fight corruption and move forward with the investigation into last year's massive explosion at Beirut's port that killed at least 214 people, wounded over 6,000 others and damaged parts of the capital. The formation of a new government Friday came after a 13-month deadlock, one of Lebanon's longest periods without a fully functioning government at a time when the country was sliding deeper into financial chaos and poverty. [Dig Deeper "Hezbollah: Iranian Tanker Bringing Fuel to Lebanon in Syria" \(Associated Press\)](#)

Nuclear Program, Missiles, Drones and Other Dangers

By Amos Gilad

- **Defense Minister Gantz, in his speech at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, presented an updated and disturbing picture of another dimension in the Iranian strategic threat to Israel and to the Arab states in the Middle East. On the one hand, Israeli intelligence's ability to present such a precise picture is admirable. On the other hand, once again, Israel's strategic failure vis-à-vis the growing Iranian threat was revealed. The nuclear threat, in combination with the extremist ideology held by the Iranian regime, is liable to become an existential danger to the State of Israel. The United States' unilateral withdrawal strategy from the JCPOA, in the thinking that stiff sanctions would break the Iranian regime from within, did not work.**
- **Today, in the absence of a sense of a military threat or an existential threat to its regime, Iran's leader, Khamenei and its new president, Raisi, are leading Iran to becoming a nuclear threshold state. In other words: Iran is enriching uranium to military-grade levels, a critical component for producing nuclear weapons, and is liable to use it for such goals as displaying its strength or as an entry ticket to the club of nuclear countries. The US, as President Biden said, is focusing its efforts on preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Iran is liable to reach the conclusion that as a nuclear threshold state, it will not be the target of a military retaliation. And if sanctions are imposed on it—it can look to other world powers for help, such as China and Russia. If Iran reaches the conclusion that there is no point in developing real nuclear weapons because this could produce a frontal clash with the US and the West, but still become a nuclear threshold state, the challenge to Israel is liable to be particularly difficult: the various Arab states—Saudi Arabia, for example, which has said as much frequently in public—is liable to join the nuclear race.**
- **Israel relies on its image and on its extraordinary strength, and a nuclear Middle East is liable to dwarf the impression of that strength and to destabilize the Middle East. Moreover, Iran, by means of its proxies in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen—and in Gaza—is expanding its ballistic missile threat, mainly against Israel's civilian and strategic infrastructure. The threat is diverse, and consists of tens of thousands of rockets, the production of missiles with the ability to deliver a precise blow and armed UAVs (as the defense minister revealed in his speech at the conference) and more. Furthermore, Iran has enacted a policy of violence, primarily against Saudi Arabia, since the latter is the most prominent Sunni state in the Middle East. The sad summary is that Israel and Iran are on a collision course, and will collide, sooner or later. What can be done? Of course, the high-quality intelligence efforts about Iran must continue, but the State of Israel must also recalculate its course and quickly strengthen its military capabilities against the emerging threat. There must be close strategic cooperation with the US. An analysis of the public remarks that have been made by the American president, the secretary of state and the national security adviser gives rise to the understanding that the road is long until the US will actively and militarily act against Iran.**

- **Its strategic priorities are different (the coronavirus, the economy, China). That said, Israel's strategic cooperation with the Arab states must be bolstered, as it was in the meeting between Bennett and Sisi in Egypt. This was a rare and extraordinary public meeting, with strategic significance. While it is true that the Egyptians cannot be relied on for military cooperation, just the fact of these burgeoning relations are a very big asset for Israel, as well as for the Arab states that continue to maintain their stability, even at the price of not becoming democracies. In summary, Iran is becoming the central threat to Israel's national security. The response required of the new Israeli government is two-pronged: rapidly building its military might, in combination with creating a strategic front with the US, Europe and the Sunni Arab states. Precisely now, on the eve of Yom Kippur, we must examine ourselves critically: judging by the results, are we as prepared as we ought to be to meet the growing Iranian threat?**

A New Beginning Up to a Point

By Smadar Peri

- We will not know this time all the details of Bennett and Sisi's conversation at their meeting in Sharm el-Sheikh. The Israeli version is that Bennett demanded that Hamas return the bodies of the two MIAs and the living hostages, and that Israel is prepared to let aid into Gaza, even after the rocket fire in the last few days. What did they say about Iran? About delivering Israeli natural gas to Lebanon via Egypt? What do they think about the situation in Syria? About the Nile River sources that meet at the Aswan Dam and drinking water for Egypt? About the terrorism problem? About the other complex issues that preoccupy one or both of the leaders? We won't know. Notably, Egypt and Israel's positions on the Iranian threat and on the difficulties posed by Turkey are not all that different. Erdogan, Sisi said—telling Bennett what he already knew—is expanding Turkey's influence in Libya, Egypt's neighbor to the west.
- Both Egypt and Israel have bad relations with Turkey. And apropos of Ethiopia drying up the Nile sources: Bennett was probably asked to make use of Israel's good ties to persuade Addis Ababa to let the Blue Nile waters flow into Egypt. Then there is the Egyptian version of the meeting, which was that the central issue discussed was about the action that needs to be taken immediately to create talks between Israel and the Palestinians—particularly now that the government in Israel has changed, now that Abu Mazen picked up the phone to call President Herzog and now that Abu Mazen met with Gantz, and Egypt is once again taking on the role of mediator and patron of Gaza's residents. The meeting was kept secret until almost the last minute. It was first proposed on August 18, when Director of the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate Abbas Kamel, Sisi's close adviser, met with Bennett and extended a formal invitation.
- The visit was rich with symbols: despite the pressure from Bennett, it was held in Sharm el-Sheikh and not Cairo, the capital, which is where Sisi holds his meetings with world leaders. He recently met there with the king of Jordan and with the PA chairman. Sisi, using his skills as a veteran intelligence officer, gathered information and impressions of Bennett from every possible source: from the Egyptian embassy in Tel Aviv, the PA in Ramallah, senior American officials, special envoys, and has still not reached a categorical conclusion about the views of the Israeli prime minister. The information that he obtained indicated that Bennett is insistent about not meeting Abu Mazen. Had Bennett projected something else, Sisi would have immediately arranged a meeting in Cairo, along with the king of Jordan, Abu Mazen, himself and Bennett. Such a meeting is still not off the table for Sisi. With a broad wink to the Americans, he made it clear to Bennett that he intends to hold an international peace conference and said that Egypt would bring all the sides together and lead this, although it was still not clear when. Since this was their first face-to-face meeting, both sides were cautious. Foreign Minister Lapid's announcement before the meeting about rebuilding Gaza was meant to mitigate earlier impressions, but Sisi still does not feel confident with the new Israeli partner. As evidence, if this had been a more or less routine meeting, and not a test, he would have permitted the media to be present.

- **But the president's advisers decided not to take any chances. Sisi would work out with Bennett what to tell the journalists after the meeting, and everything else would remain secret. The meeting, which was held one-on-one (with two translators) lasted over three hours because of the need to translate from Hebrew into Arabic and from Arabic to English. That wasn't a simple process: the two men looked each other in the eye and waited for the translation. Bennett summarized: "We laid the foundation for a deep connection." This was a very public visit, with the flags of Israel and Egypt behind the two leaders. In January 2011, the last time an Israeli prime minister (Netanyahu) met with an Egyptian president, only the Egyptian flag was on display. Israel complained, and a few days later, Mubarak was no longer in power. Civilian relations between Egypt and Israel, despite 40 years of peace, are very low key. There are things that could be done in the sphere of agriculture, the volume of trade can and should be increased, and let's not forget the dozens of times that Israeli high-tech entrepreneurs tried to cooperate with Cairo's new smart city and were rebuffed. Presumably, something will change soon. Sisi will slowly instill normalization, signaling to all those who are watching—mainly the Persian Gulf emirates. A first sign—reinstating the economic cooperation and four weekly flights from Cairo to Tel Aviv by the Egyptian national airline—is expected soon.**