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## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Friday, September 3*

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# News Excerpts

September 3, 2021

## Ynet News

### **Knesset Gives 2021–22 State Budget Preliminary Nod**

Knesset gave preliminary approval to the 2021–2022 state budget, Israel's first ratified spending package in more than three years. Lawmakers passed the 14-month budget bill in first reading, voting 59–54 on the 2021 budget and 59–53 for 2022. Votes for final approval are due in November. The Knesset session was a fresh test for the cross-partisan coalition government of Naftali Bennett, who took over after unseating Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Bennett wields a razor-thin majority in parliament. The budget earmarked \$134.85b in 2021 spending and \$141b for 2022 — including funds to fight the coronavirus pandemic. Bennett and Finance Minister Avigdor Liberman had come under pressure from ministers and lawmakers upset at some planned reforms, while others sought higher funding. [Dig Deeper “In Boon to Bennett, Knesset Fully Okays Budget in Its First Readings” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## Jerusalem Post

### **Herzog Asks Foreign Diplomats to Boycott Durban Conf**

President Isaac Herzog urged foreign diplomats stationed in Israel to ask their nations and governments to boycott the upcoming Durban IV conference scheduled to take place later this month, around the same time as the opening of the 76th UN General Assembly. Herzog was speaking at the annual state reception hosted just ahead of Rosh Hashanah by the president for the foreign diplomatic corps. Several countries with which Israel has diplomatic relations have already opted out of the conference, realizing that it will be used as a platform for antisemitism and Israel-bashing. Israel is always ready to be a friend to those who choose the path of peace, he said, but unfortunately, evil continues to permeate the Middle East with hate, incitement and war. Herzog was pleased that among his guests were the ambassadors of Morocco and Bahrain. [Dig Deeper “Biden Tells Rabbis He Is Tackling Antisemitism, Wants Hate Monitor Confirmed” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## Reuters

### **Israeli Military Investigates Fatal Shooting of Palestinian**

The Israeli military said it was investigating the fatal shooting of a Palestinian civilian in the occupied West Bank, who residents said was killed by soldiers while returning from work in Israel. In a statement, the military said troops operating near a highway where Israeli vehicles had come under fire-bomb attack earlier in the week, had fired at a "suspect, who fled the area". Some 90 minutes later, "a civilian with a gunshot wound" arrived at an Israeli military checkpoint in critical condition and was treated by medical personnel, but died, the statement said. "The incident is under review and is simultaneously being investigated by the Military Police Criminal Investigation Division," the military said. "The findings will be transferred to the Military Advocate General's Corps for examination." [Dig Deeper “Palestinians Save Jewish Woman Attacked with Stones near Hebron” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## **Riots along Gaza Border for Sixth Consecutive Night**

For the sixth consecutive evening, Palestinian rioters demonstrated along the border between the Gaza Strip and Israel, seeking [clashes](#) with Israeli forces. Protesters from the "nightly disturbance units" threw explosives at Israeli soldiers positioned along the border and burned tires. The Israel I military responded by attempting to disperse the protesters by riot control. The IDF chief of staff said that the military stands ready for an operation if the violence continues with the same intensity. The incidents come as Israel reopened the Kerem Shalom crossing point and extended the fishing zone of the Strip for the first time since the war between Israel and Gaza last May. Israel has also announced that it will bring more water and increase the number of permits for traders in the Strip from 2,000 to 7,000. Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) said, the Israeli body responsible for civilian operations in the Palestinian Territories. [Dig Deeper "2 Palestinians Dead after Egypt Pumps Toxic Gas into Gaza Smuggling Tunnel" \(I24 News\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

## **Cairo Smt Calls on Quartet to Lead Israeli-Palestinian Talks**

The Quartet must replace the US as the main broker in any peace talks with Israel, Egyptian, Jordanian and Palestinian leaders declared at the end of a trilateral summit in Cairo. They pledged to "work together to develop a vision to activate efforts to resume negotiations, and to work with brothers and partners to revive the peace process," according to a statement issued at the summit's end, and that this would be done "in accordance with international resolutions, and under the auspices of the International Quartet," composed of the UN, the EU , Russia and the US. Egyptian President Abdul Fattah el-Sisi hosted King Abdullah of Jordan and Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas in advance of the upcoming UN General Assembly. The three leaders want to use the international platform to help revive the peace process, which has been frozen since 2014. Unlike any of his predecessors in the last three decades, President Joe Biden has not put forward any plan for a resolution to the conflict. [Dig Deeper "Abbas: Ready for Confidence-Building with Israel" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Times of Israel

## **Israel Cautioned Biden against Criticism of Egypt, Saudi**

Israeli officials have cautioned their counterparts in the Biden administration against being overly critical of the Saudi and Egyptian governments, due to concerns that that such criticism might lead Riyadh and Cairo to turn to countries like Iran, China and Russia for support, according to a source familiar with the matter. Biden entered office vowing to place a premium on human rights in the crafting of his foreign policy, warning that countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt would need to reform if they wanted to maintain their longstanding relationships with the US. But that approach has worried Israel, which believes it could alienate Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and Egypt's President el-Sissi. Those concerns have been passed along to administration officials on multiple occasions, said the source, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. However, the matter was not raised during the meeting between Biden and Prime Minister Bennett.

## **Israel Opens Chinese-Run Terminal at Haifa Port**

Israel opened a new terminal run by a Chinese firm at the port of Haifa, in a move expected to boost Israel's economy and open new opportunities for trade with Gulf countries. The inauguration comes as Israel seeks to increase the flow of goods into its ports and increase competition by lowering prices. Israel relies on its ports — chief among them Haifa — for some 90% of Israel's goods. The \$1.7b terminal is to be managed by China's state-owned Shanghai International Port Group (SIPG). The 25-year management agreement raised security concerns in Washington. The US Navy frequently makes stops at Haifa, while the Israeli navy also maintains its largest base adjacent to the port. CIA Director Bill Burns raised concerns over Chinese investment in Israel during a meeting with Prime Minister Naftali Bennett in Israel last month. Chinese infrastructure investment in Israel developed into an increasingly uncomfortable subject between the two allies during the Donald Trump administration. The Trump administration pushed Israeli counterparts to avoid further encroachment by Chinese companies, particularly in telecommunications, and warned that deeper Chinese involvement could hurt US-Israel security ties. [Dig Deeper "Bennett to Take Action on China Investments after Biden Meeting" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

### I24 News

## **CENTCOM Takes Responsibility for US Forces in Israel**

The US Central Command (CENTCOM) officially assumed responsibility for US forces in Israel, saying in a statement that the realignment "strengthens the strategic US-Israeli defense relationship." Israel was for decades under the authority of US European Command (EUCOM) in an effort to avoid tensions with Arab and Muslim countries in the Middle East traditionally hostile to Israel. However, with more Arab and Muslim countries normalizing relations with Israel recently, the US military in January announced the re-shuffle of its command structure. The easing of tensions between Israel and its Arab neighbors after the Abraham Accords has provided a strategic opportunity for the US to align key partners against shared threats in the Middle East," the Pentagon said. CENTCOM said that the realignment offers "opportunities to deepen operational collaboration" between the Israeli military and regional partners. In a sign of the increasing military cooperation between the US and Israel, on Tuesday US and Israeli naval forces staged a joint exercise on the Red Sea. As part of the recent exercise, four Israeli and US Navy ships sailed together in the Gulf of Aqaba.

## **Every Prince a King**

By Nahum Barnea

- It was a relatively good week for Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. It began with his return from a successful visit to the White House, continued with a drop in the number of seriously ill with COVID-19 and ended with the start of the school year, without a lockdown and without strikes. He will have many opportunities to be nostalgic for this week: a mountain of difficult problems awaits him. For now, he can be pleased with what he has. The Bennett government is like a feudal monarchy: every prince is certain that they are king of their domain. We saw a classic example of how this kingdom is run in the way the defense budget was decided, including the controversial additions for the chief of staff: the agreement was worked out between Gantz and Liberman, behind Bennett's back. When Yaalon and Kahlon pulled the same maneuver, Netanyahu neither forgave nor forgot. After a while, both of them found themselves on the outside.
- Bennett does not have this privilege. He has to treat his princes delicately: any one of them can bring him down in a vote. He wants to leave his mark, to generate change, to soar, but the political reality forces him to stay on the ground and do maintenance work. In contrast to some of my colleagues, including in this newspaper, I think that he has managed the coronavirus crisis well so far. Netanyahu invested in buying vaccines. That was a bold, pioneering, visionary move that did not receive the praise that it deserved in real time. Bennett refrained from imposing a lockdown: that is also playing in his and our favor for now. If we get through the holidays safely, he will be able to celebrate his victory. His achievement should not be measured against Netanyahu, but rather against the decisions of other world leaders.
- His trip to America convinced him that the Delta variant has still not inflicted the peak of its damage: in the fall and winter, it will deliver a harsh blow to many countries in the world. Israel will be in a relatively good situation, thanks to the third vaccine dose. I covered his visit to America. I saw a young man, lacking real public backing, arriving for an event that he had only envisioned in his dreams. Perhaps to his surprise, he was not particularly excited. Biden did not fall asleep and Bennett did not fall apart. The preparatory work had been excellent. Political adviser Shimrit Meir and new National Security Council Director Eyal Hulata had sown the seeds, and Bennett reaped the harvest. Bennett's team is of a higher quality than Netanyahu's was.
- More importantly: the team works professionally, without conspiracy and without paranoia, without court intrigue and without groveling to the boss, his wife and his son. I once wrote that I didn't know who would bring Netanyahu down, but I do know the name of his family. Bennett does not have a constituency. That is a disaster in the long-term; it is an advantage in the short-term. Within the confines of the space afforded him by his complicated coalition, he is free—he does not have to meet voters' expectations, pressure from vote contractors, the requests of lobbyists and tycoons. Ben-Gurion once said: "I don't know what the people want; I know what the people should have."

- **Bennett can endorse this fully. He returned from Washington without having resolved the problem of Iran. On this critical issue, Netanyahu left him scorched earth, a lot of rhetoric and very little action. If I understand correctly, since 2015, no preparations have been made for military action against the Iranian nuclear program. Netanyahu had hoped that the American economic sanctions would topple the regime. That didn't happen. Released from the nuclear agreement, Iran made major progress toward immunity and the bomb. Presumably, if Iran does not accede, the door will be open to military cooperation with the Americans. The foundations were laid in the private meeting with the president. I don't know how long this government will last and when, if at all, the crown of the premiership will sit naturally on Naftali Bennett's balding head. But after years of domestic rift, incitement, fake news, playing the victim and personality cult—it's good to see a prime minister and a government suffering the usual, conventional political headaches. Long live normalcy.**

## **A Rearguard Battle**

By Sima Kadmon

- The battle over the budget is more significant than just passing a state budget after having not had one for three years. It is a battle between life and death. First of all for the coalition, since if it had failed to pass the budget yesterday in a first vote, this would have marked the beginning of its end. It is also do-or-die battle for the opposition chairman, for the exact same reason but the other way around—passing the budget could spell the end of his political career. If the budget also passes its second and third votes, it will be possible to state officially that Netanyahu will become prey. Even yesterday, the sharks began to circle their bleeding member. The top Likud members who had entrenched themselves in silence for so many years rushed to give interviews to all the media and mark their territory. They intend to run for the leadership. The question as to whether this would happen after the Netanyahu era seemed irrelevant. As far as they are concerned, that era has arrived.
- A source who is very close to a prominent Likud member told me that Barkat, Katz, Edelstein and perhaps a few others who are thinking of running would themselves vote in favor of the budget if they could, just to be rid of Netanyahu. A Likud faction meeting was held this week in Kfar Maccabiah. The guest was Prof. Avi Simhon, Netanyahu's economist. The idea was to explain the Likud's messages ahead of the vote on the budget and to divide them into work groups, so that every former minister could interview on a different subject. Edelstein would talk about health, Katz about finance, Regev about transportation, etc. According to a Likud source, it didn't get off the ground. Nobody wanted to work with Netanyahu's talking points. Now, when the budget will probably pass its second and third votes, they will start attacking their prey. Because after the budget passes—and Netanyahu knows this very well—he will be headed into the political wilderness for a long time.
- Passing the budget is not just a victory for the coalition, it is also proof of its stability. Getting the arrangements bill passed was more difficult, and it too was passed, without postponing it for later votes. A week in which the school year starts on time and no lockdown is imposed for the holidays is a good week for the Bennett government. The one person who marred "the good will, the honesty and unity" of the coalition partners was Gantz, who promised that he would keep his meeting with Abu Mazen under the radar and then made a media fest out of it. The problem with Gantz, said coalition sources this week, is his incessant pursuit of honors. The only thing that preoccupies him is how close he sits to the cameras, how big his car is, how many titles he has. On the other hand, nobody thinks that he has any alternative. "You don't actually envision Alon Schuster and Michael Biton going with him to form a government with Ben Gvir," said one minister. The recording that the prime minister circulated yesterday in phone calls and on WhatsApp, in which he called on people to get vaccinated, came after a week of expectation that the unvaccinated would go in droves to the vaccination compounds. The decision to release from quarantine people returning from overseas who have had three doses did not do what they hoped it would.

- **The expectation was that for many of the unvaccinated, wanting an exemption from quarantine would overcome their anti-vaccination ideology and that being able to go and come back without quarantining would push them to get vaccinated. But despite the encouraging data that show that the booster shot protects the vaccinated 15 times more than the unvaccinated, and despite incentives, the daily number of vaccinations compared to last week was only a few thousand more. That was why Bennett decided to do his part to spur the public. But it's hard to believe that a voice message from Bennett, sounding more like an HMO telephone receptionist than a prime minister, will do the job. It suffered from the same problem that his speech, after his meeting with Biden, suffered from: it was too long.**
- **The question of whether Biden fell asleep while Bennett was talking has still not been settled, but most people probably were unable to hear the message to its end. The coronavirus cabinet's unsuccessful decision, which must be fixed immediately, is that classes in red localities in which at least 70% of the students have been vaccinated will learn remotely. What kind of dubious incentive will there be to vaccinate children if ultimately it is the unvaccinated who decide whether they attend school or not? It should be the other way around: the vaccinated, no matter what percentage they are, should go to school. The unvaccinated should stay home. There you have the most effective incentive to run and get vaccinated.**