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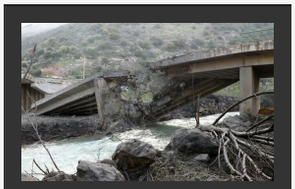

LIVE

Katz threatens destruction of Lebanese infrastructure as 'price' of not disarming Hezbollah

By TOI STAFF

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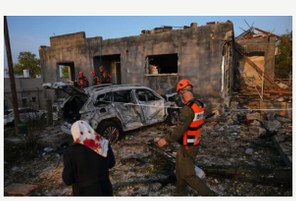

Woman wounded by shrapnel, dozens lightly hurt as Iranian missile hits northern town

By EMANUEL FABIAN, AGENCIES and DIANA BLETTER

US military announces 4 killed in aircraft crash; IDF strikes 200 targets in Iran over past day, including underground weapons site; French soldier killed in Iraq, 2 dead in Oman

Israel targets Iran's Basij members and drones, as Tehran's missile attacks continue

Iran's Larijani says war won't end before enemies made sorry for 'grave miscalculation'

Live updates (closed) / March 12: Iran threatens to 'set region's oil and gas on fire' if energy infrastructure attacked

As Mideast war rages, fear rises in Europe of Iran-orchestrated terror attacks

An unlikely symbol of cooperation, the barn owl unites Jordanian and Israeli scientists

Experts from 12 countries convene in Greece for project that began as Jordanian-Israeli collaboration to protect rodent-eating bird of prey that is boon to farmers across Mideast

By DEREK GATOPOULOS
29 January 2025, 3:40 pm

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A barn owl at the Attica Zoological Park, near Athens, on January 21, 2025. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stravrakis)

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — It soars over the borders and divisions of the war-torn Middle East, bringing Arab and Israeli academics together.

An unlikely symbol of cooperation, the barn owl is now getting global attention.

Experts from 12 countries gathered in Greece last week to discuss an effort to help this remarkable predator that began decades ago as an unlikely Israeli-Jordanian collaboration.

The moon-faced, shoebox-sized owl is a ruthless pest controller, protecting crops from rodents and other nuisances.

"A pair of barn owls eats between 2,000 and 6,000 rodents every year, allowing farmers to stop using pesticides," says Yossi Leshem, professor emeritus at Tel Aviv University's School of Zoology.

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But as modern building techniques eliminate the nooks and crannies that shelter their nests, their populations have fallen.

Bird trainer Myrto Mazmanidi carries a barn owl on a falconry glove at the Attica Zoological Park, near Athens, on January 21, 2025. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stravrakis)

Conservation initiatives aim to protect the barn owl from urban encroachment by creating networks of artificial nests — typically modified plywood boxes — and by cutting down on the use of pesticides and rodenticides that can poison predatory birds.

Leshem pioneered the nesting project in the early 1980s on a community farm.

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"From 14 nesting boxes in one kibbutz, it grew into a national project with 5,000 boxes in Israel and partnerships in Jordan, Palestine, Cyprus and Morocco," he says.

In 2002, Leshem partnered with retired general Mansour Abu Rashid, to bring the boxes to Jordan.

Abu Rashid helped extend the project's tracking system to Jordan, using lightweight radio transmitters to monitor the birds.

"Barn owls know no boundaries; they fly between Jordan, Palestine, and Israel," said Leshem. "They symbolize cooperation."

Four US soldiers killed as refueling plane crashes in Iraq due to apparent accident

By EMANUEL FABIAN and AGENCIES

Rescue efforts ongoing as fate of two other crew-members unconfirmed; second tanker involved in incident safely lands at Ben Gurion Airport after sending out emergency signal

Iran hits 2 oil tankers in Gulf as IDF reports striking 'critical' nuclear site near Tehran

IDF says dozens of sites struck in Tehran as it moves to 'deepen the blow' against regime

UN Security Council demands Iran halt attacks on Gulf states

Netanyahu says he doesn't know if Iranians will oust regime, threatens new supreme leader

By LAZAR BERMAN and NAVA FREIBERG

'You can lead someone to water, can't make him drink,' says PM in first press conference of war; scoffs IRGC 'puppet' Mojtaba Khamenei can't 'show his face in public'; says Israel killed top nuclear scientist

Iran's new supreme leader purportedly issues defiant first statement, without appearing

'Multitude' of US intel reports said to show Iranian regime not at risk of falling

Interview / FM Sa'ar to ToI: Only Iranians can bring down regime, but they need outside help

Gunman rams vehicle into Michigan synagogue and preschool before being shot dead

By LUKE TRESS and AGENCIES

Guard wounded, no other casualties in attack that occurred as children attended preschool on premises; Temple Israel says 'terrorist gunman neutralized' by heroic security personnel; FBI probes 'targeted act of violence against Jewish community'

US political standoff over immigration delays security grants for synagogues

Michigan shul is at least the 7th Diaspora synagogue targeted so far this month

Michigan synagogue's security preparations credited with saving lives

Teen girl fatally run over, reportedly while rushing to shelter amid Iran missile attack

By CHARLIE SUMMERS

17-year-old fatally struck by a car in Rehovot after central city received early warning of attack, though sirens didn't ultimately sound there

Katz threatens to take territory in Lebanon if attacks persist; evacuation warnings expand

By EMANUEL FABIAN and AGENCIES

/ Demanding end to Hezbollah's rocket and drone fire, defense minister says army readying to expand operations; Lebanese told to leave homes south of Zahrani River

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Northern communities protest cuts to rehabilitation budget amid war

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By AP and TOI STAFF

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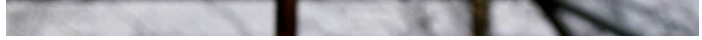

A barn owl flies in an enclosure at the Attica Zoological Park, near Athens, on January 21, 2025. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stravrakis)

It's a critical region for bird conservation of all kinds, sitting at the junction of long-distance migration routes.

Arab and Israeli scientists have kept their collaboration going during periods of tension and war, including the ongoing conflict in Gaza. When necessary, they switch to online meetings and talks at international conferences.

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According to conference officials, the main impact of the war on the owl program recorded so far is the large amount of land destroyed in Lebanon, burning nesting areas and boxes in areas near the Israeli border.

"We never stop; we just keep going," Leshem says. "That's why this project is successful."

Another challenge was overcoming the region's long-standing superstitions about owls.

In the region, the birds are often regarded as harbingers of bad luck. One theory is that they were often attracted to the light from homes during nighttime vigils for the dying.

A birdwatcher wears pins for barn owls, and the Greek environmental group TYTO as Karla lake , near the town of Stefanovikeio, Larissa, central Greece, on January 22, 2025. (AP Photo/Petros Giannakouris)

In Jordan, imams were enlisted in rural areas to counter the superstition, Abu Rashid says.

"We started awareness programs in schools and universities, engaging local communities. We involved women's associations because they influence families and communities," he says. "Children colored in pictures of barn owls."

Like Leshem, Abu Rashid says science offers unique opportunities for fostering collaboration, even among adversaries.

A former director of Jordanian military intelligence and a senior negotiator in the Jordan-Israel peace accords in the mid-1990s, the retired general has devoted his post-military life to peace initiatives.

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"I changed my life after leaving the army, and we're still working to bring people together from across the Middle East," he says. "I hope we will succeed."

He and Leshem, now both in their late 70s, have presented the barn owl initiative to global leaders, including the late US president Jimmy Carter, former German chancellor Angela Merkel and Pope Francis.

Yossi Leshem, professor emeritus at Tel Aviv University's School of Zoology, left, and Mansour Abu Rashid, former director of Jordanian military intelligence, chat as a birdwatcher look on through his monocular while fog covers the Karla lake, near the town of Stefanovikeio, Larissa, central Greece, on January 22, 2025. (AP Photo/Petros Giannakouris)

Swiss scientist Alexandre Roulin said that barn owl nesting projects are gaining traction in Europe, helping populations recover after nesting sites in traditional barns and farm attics disappeared.

"This bird is widespread worldwide. The model we've implemented can be replicated in many other countries, including the United States and Asia," says Roulin, a professor at the University of Lausanne.

"It's a nocturnal bird surrounded by mystery and superstition, but it's fascinating," he adds. "They're one of the only nocturnal predators that are white. Why white? Research suggests their white feathers reflect moonlight, creating a ghostly appearance that startles prey."

Barn owls also have near surround vision, swiveling their heads up to 270 degrees, far beyond a human's 170 degrees. Their eerie screeches, unlike the gentler hoots of other owls, add to their reputation as formidable predators.

The conference in Greece, which concluded Friday, was the third of its kind since 2018, when participants came from just four countries. This year, new attendees included Germany, Georgia, and Ukraine. Organizers hope to welcome delegations from dozens more countries at next year's meeting in Geneva, Switzerland.

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'Every light is flashing': After shootings at synagogues, Canada's Jews fear what's next

By ZEV STUB

Community leaders worry a Bondi Beach-type attack is around the corner after years of unchecked antisemitism; they're hopeful lawmakers will finally heed the warnings

INSIDE STORY
NURIT YOHANAN

Joining Iran's war, Hezbollah opens up a rift with its Lebanese Shiite base

Criticism is intensifying over the terror group's decision to attack Israel and drag Lebanon into a foreign war, weakening its standing with its backers and on the political stage

Backlash against Hezbollah grows as still-reeling Lebanon again battered by war

Pope mourns Lebanese priest reportedly killed by IDF while aiding wounded villagers

INSIDE STORY

With foreign airlines fleeing war, fares take off as local carriers cash in

By SHARON WROBEL

Ticket prices for the coming weeks have already gone up by 15% in the past 10 days, as Israeli airlines look to profit off a dominant position during war yet again, says expert

Man seriously wounded in Ramat Gan stabbing; police suspect terror motive

By CHARLIE SUMMERS and EMANUEL FABIAN

Cops arrest alleged assailant, a 20-year-old Arab Israeli, shortly after attack; victim, Shas-linked head of Ramat Gan's religious council, receives visit from Deri in hospital

Seeking refuge from sirens and strikes, Israelis migrate south to quiet Mitzpe Ramon

By JESSICA STEINBERG

Located in the middle of the vast Negev Desert, the isolated hamlet on the Ramon Crater has seen the arrival of thousands since the joint US-Israeli attack on Iran's regime

Amid Mortozov, victim of Iranian cluster bomb strike, laid to rest in Petah Tivka

Conservation officer Anna Kazazou holds a barn owl after removing it from a nesting box at the Attica Zoological Park, near Athens, on January 21, 2025. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stravrakis)

The conference attendees, who also traveled to farming areas in central Greece, exchanged knowledge on a variety of subjects including "soft release" methods to adapt zoo-reared owls to natural conditions.

Vasileios Bontzorlos, who headed the Greek environmental group TYTO and hosted the conference, said that interest is growing across countries.

"Agriculture officials are becoming more open to natural solutions. That's a huge milestone for us," Bontzorlos says.

"Years ago, I visited Israel, Jordan, and Palestine and sat at the same table with people from all three nationalities," he says. "Hosting these discussions in Greece gives me hope. At a time when we often only hear bad news, this shows that collaboration is possible, even in difficult circumstances. It's incredibly moving."

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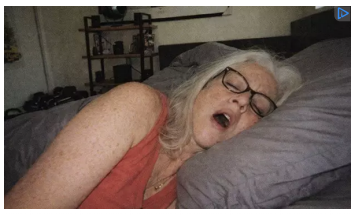

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By ARIELA KARMEL

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Education minister: Some schools may reopen next week, but not in Tel Aviv area or north

By ROSSELLA TERCATIN and TOI STAFF

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With schools still shut, working Israeli parents yank out hair over wartime Zoom classes

Settlers said to graffiti and try to torch West Bank mosque; entrance damaged

By NURIT YOHANAN and TOI STAFF

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Government officials mark repopulation of Homesh settlement in West Bank

Man kidnaps daughters to West Bank; officers rescue them, arrest him

INSIDE STORY

A 2016 photo of a Palestinian flag landed a teacher in cuffs. Police call it 'incitement'

By CHARLIE SUMMERS

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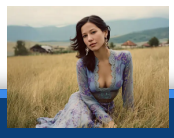

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