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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Friday, December 28

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News Excerpts

December 28, 2018

Jerusalem Post

Former General Gantz Announces New Party

Former IDF chief of staff Benny Gantz formally entered politics Thursday, registering the “Israel Resilience Party.” Sources would not confirm reports that Gantz intends to build a bloc with former defense minister Moshe Ya’alon’s new party, and wanted the bloc to also include MK Orly Levy-Abecasis’s new Geshet party but she turned Gantz down. Opposition Leader Tzipi Livni has reportedly met with Gantz to join his party. Possible candidates include former justice minister Dan Meridor, and former Yeruham mayor Michael Biton.

Times of Israel

PM Denounces Desecration of AG Father’s Grave

Vandals desecrated the grave of the father of Israel's Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has asked Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan to investigate who is responsible for the act of vandalism. Earlier Thursday, Israeli daily Yisrael Hayom's front page displayed a story in which Likud party officials threatened to orchestrate a "merciless attack" on Mendelblit if he publishes his recommendations on the different corruption cases Netanyahu is embroiled in before the elections.

Times of Israel

Palestinians to Reapply for Full UN Membership

The Palestinian Authority plans to apply for full membership at the United Nations, a move that is highly unlikely to succeed due to the opposition of the US and other countries. At least nine countries would have to vote in favor of granting Palestine full membership, and even then one of the council’s five permanent members could veto the resolution. The vote is expected to take place on January 15 in the framework of the Security Council’s quarterly discussion on the Situation in the Middle East.

Ha’aretz

PA Bans Israeli Agricultural Products After Israeli Ban

The PA said Thursday it will bar Israeli fruit, vegetables and poultry from West Bank Palestinian markets, in retaliation for a decision by Agriculture Minister Uri Ariel to bar produce grown by Palestinians in the West Bank from being sold in Israel. What began as an effort by the Palestinian Agriculture Ministry to prop up the price of meat in the Palestinian market turned into a political arm-wrestling match. Ariel’s office said his order came in the wake of a PA directive ending the import of lambs from Israeli breeders.

Times of Israel

France, PA Condemn New Settlement Plans

France and the Palestinian Authority on Thursday both condemned Israel's green-lighting of nearly 2,200 West Bank settlement homes, saying the move undermined the prospects for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. The French statement noted that the construction approval "heightens tensions," and that a two-state solution is "the only way to ensure a just and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians." Of the 839 home plans moved forward by the Civil Administration's High Planning Subcommittee, 352 gained final approval for construction while 487 homes had their plans cleared through an earlier planning stage known as "deposit."

Ha'aretz

Ariel Medical School May Lose Official Status

Israel's Justice Ministry ordered Ariel University on Thursday to avoid any irreversible steps concerning the establishment of its new medical school, and to make it clear to students who sign up that the official approval given the medical school is now under review. In a letter to the heads of Ariel University and the Council for Higher Education, the Justice Ministry says one of the members of the CHE's planning and budgeting subcommittee, Dr. Rivka Wadmany Shauman, may have had a conflict of interest in her vote in support for the new medical school in the large West Bank settlement of Ariel. The establishment of the medical school would be funded in large part by a donation of \$20 million from American Jewish businessman Sheldon Adelson.

Ynet

Gazan Incendiary Balloons Land Near Israeli Kindergarten

A cluster of 10 balloons attached to an explosive device landed on Friday near a kindergarten yard in moshav Kfar Maimon in the Sdot Negev Regional Council, close to the Israeli border with Gaza. The police were called to the scene to neutralize the device. The incidents occurs after many weeks during which there were no reports of incendiary balloons launched from Gaza.

Times of Israel

Ahead of PM Visit to Brazil, Bolsonaro Blasts Israel Critics

Brazil's incoming president Jair Bolsonaro pushed back against critics and feted burgeoning ties with Israel Thursday, as Netanyahu made his way to Brasilia for the new leader's swearing in. Bolsonaro said those who were protesting his drive to develop deeper ties with Israel had done nothing to help Latin America's biggest country. Bolsonaro has also been criticized over his vow to move his country's embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and to close the Palestinian embassy in Brasilia.

Early Israeli Elections Could Trigger Gaza Violence

By Shlomi Eldar, Senior Columnist

- The Gaza-Israeli border has been relatively calm for the past seven weeks, but the quiet appears about to end. Over the weekend of Dec. 21-22, four young Palestinian protesters were killed in clashes with Israeli troops along the border and Hamas' military leadership held back from responding. During last month's violence, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu exercised restraint after hundreds of rockets were fired from Gaza into Israel, his sights set on the planned operation to expose and block the Hezbollah tunnels on Israel's northern border. Despite domestic criticism of his decision on Gaza, Netanyahu decided to give the arrangement with Hamas a chance. Given the tensions in the south of Israel and the complex set of clashing interests there, Hamas and Israel are occasionally forced to restrain themselves, not always successfully. Back in Jerusalem Dec. 26, the Knesset voted to disband and the next elections were pushed up from November 2019 to April 9. The Hamas leadership understands that the cease-fire arrangement reached with Israel in November could collapse if a campaigning Netanyahu faces heavy election pressure on the issue. The Israeli political system might not accept Netanyahu conducting business as usual with Hamas. The organization is therefore preparing to challenge Netanyahu so that he does not renege on the deal that has already yielded a series of achievements for them.
- I can testify firsthand to the extent that Israeli politics affect decisions by Hamas. On the eve of Operation Cast Lead in late December 2008, I covered the voyage of a small aid vessel that departed from Limassol in Cyprus bound for Gaza. The winds of war were already buffeting the Strip. When the boat docked in Gaza on Dec. 20, Abed Haniyeh, the son of Ismail Haniyeh, who was at the time the prime minister of Gaza and currently heads the organization's political bureau, approached me. He wanted to know whether I thought Israel was heading for war against Gaza with the 2009 elections two months away. "Are Defense Minister Ehud Barak and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert planning a war on Gaza to improve their standing within their parties?" he asked. The younger Haniyeh displayed an impressive understanding of political developments in Israel and knew that Barak, then Labor chair, was lagging behind in the polls. Like other top Hamas figures, he figured that Barak might want to improve his ratings by going to war and shifting the agenda in his favor.
- A week later, the Israel Defense Forces launched a wide-scale operation in Gaza, not necessarily to help Barak's ratings but rather because Hamas' armed wing unleashed a massive rocket attack on Israel. Israel's decision-makers saw a military strike as the only way to stem the rocket fire. Hamas, playing with fire, had sparked a war that cost the lives of over 1,000 Palestinians and wounded thousands. Now the Hamas leadership is again following the political drama in Israel, seeking to prepare for whatever the future holds. Hamas assumes that implementation of the cease-fire arrangement is at risk, and with it its hold on power in Gaza. Even before the early elections were announced, Hamas was concerned that Israel would block

Qatari financial aid after Netanyahu was harshly criticized for agreeing to the funding. Now Hamas fears, and rightly so, that Netanyahu might seek an excuse to suspend the cease-fire deal, including the flow of Qatari money, to placate his critics ahead of the elections.

- Hamas is facing other difficulties. On Dec. 26, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas decided to disband the moribund Hamas-controlled Palestinian legislature elected in January 2006, in which Hamas holds 74 seats and its rival Fatah 45. Does that mean Abbas has decided to sever all ties between the PA and Gaza and to give up on ever joining forces with Hamas and controlling the Strip? Absent a reconciliation between the two factions, it is hard to see how new parliamentary elections can take place in the West Bank and Gaza at the same time. The dissolution of the Legislative Council, headed by senior Hamas official Aziz Dweik, sent the Hamas leadership into a spin. Uncertainty is their greatest fear. When Abbas dissolves the Palestinian Parliament and the Knesset dissolves itself in the same week, Hamas smells trouble. Add in the repeated PA criticism of Qatar's funding, with Abbas accusing Netanyahu on Dec. 22 of "paying Hamas in Gaza to carry out terror attacks in the West Bank."
- If elections for a new Palestinians legislature are scheduled in six months, the Hamas leadership would not want to be perceived as laying down the weapon of jihad in return for suitcases of Qatari cash with the consent of the "Zionist enemy." After all, if it does not wage an armed struggle against Israel and is not considered a militant alternative to Fatah, Hamas has no *raison d'être*. Israeli defense officials also realize that the relative calm could end at any moment. An Israeli defense source told Al-Monitor that Israel assumes Hamas is gearing up for another round of widespread violence. Indications of such plans were evident at a conference held this week in Gaza with the participation of all the Palestinian factions, who were briefed about the latest developments and asked to prepare in case the demonstrations along the Israeli border fence — curtailed in recent weeks under the cease-fire deal — are resumed in force.
- Netanyahu will try again to avoid a military operation against Gaza. Three months prior to elections is obviously not the right time for upheavals. As both prime minister and minister of defense, all the responsibility rests on Netanyahu, obliging him to swallow any insults that Hamas feeds him. Meanwhile, according to London-based Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, Netanyahu conveyed to Hamas that he was interested in reaching a long-term cease-fire but would do so only in April. But if Hamas chooses to escalate the security situation, it should expect consequences. The Coordination and Liaison Administration for Gaza warned Gaza residents from the Civil Administration's Facebook account Dec. 26, "The IDF will not tolerate events at the fence. We also want a Friday with no casualties among you, but it depends only on you." It is doubtful that Hamas will prefer to follow the quiet path and wait for April to make a move, even though the movement has learned the hard way that playing with fire could end in a war with thousands of dead and wounded.

Taking a Chance on Gantz

By Yuval Carni, Columnist

- Even after the Knesset voted Wednesday to dissolve itself and head to early elections, former IDF Chief Benny Gantz kept mum about his political plans. Gantz is expected to be one of the main stars of the 2019 elections, but in the meantime he is considered an enigma — not speaking of what he intends to do or even presenting his views to the public. Gantz is silent and yet his potential seat count is climbing, perhaps due to the yearning for something new that appears in almost every election campaign. Gantz has maintained this thunderous silence for months, even refusing to speak truly openly with the people closest to him. His apparent behind-the-scenes plans to take the upcoming elections by storm has been carried out in total secrecy. Ultimately, he has two options: to join one of the existing major parties or to compete in an entirely new one. The tall, stoic former army chief has been courted by several party leaders, including the Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu, Yair Lapid of Yesh Atid, and Avi Gabbay of Zionist Union/Labor.
- It has even been reported that Netanyahu even offered Gantz the post of foreign minister to both woo him over to the Likud and neutralize a real political threat (Netanyahu denied it; Gantz refused to comment). Lapid and Gabbay also bent over backwards, each offering him the number 2 spot on their Knesset lists and the role of defense minister should they be the one to form the next government. Last Thursday, Gabbay even presented his party's membership with a poll showing that Zionist Union would take 29 out of the Knesset's 120 seats with Gantz in the No. 2 spot. An associate of the veteran soldier said that as his political stock rose and his polling skyrocketed, Gantz fell in love with the idea of running on his own list in the top spot. Why should he be beholden to someone else? "Gantz could be defense minister in any government that is formed, so he is not willing to gamble on joining a particular party, but would rather run under his own steam," says a source who recently spoke to Gantz. "He's a very calculating man and everything he does is checked a thousand times, sometimes to his own detriment.
- Benny Gantz has several political associates, such as Adina Bar-Shalom, former Yerucham mayor Michael Biton and attorney Rachel Turjeman, as well as a number of personal advisers working with him behind the scenes. A few weeks ago, close associates announced that they had formed the Ahi Yisraeli (My Israeli Brother) party, to create a platform for a future Gantz run. Gantz rejected this option, and Biton, announced last Saturday that he had decided to step down as chairman of My Israeli Brother to join whatever political entity that Gantz forms himself. According to some reports, Gantz has already registered a new party to run in the upcoming elections, but he has not disclosed the details. Ehud Barak, another former IDF chief turned politician said this week that he is considering joining a united bloc against Netanyahu himself, and warned that Gantz would be making a mistake if he ran on his own ticket, as three moderate parties would fare less well against Netanyahu than one large one to going head to head with the prime minister. Perhaps Benny Gantz will answer the prayers of those searching

for an alternative to Netanyahu, but we must bear in mind that we still know nothing about the Gantz the politician, not Gantz the chief of staff. In the army, Gantz was a major general, but in politics he is a private.