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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

January 31, 2019

Times of Israel

Polls: Joint Gantz-Lapid List Could Defeat Netanyahu

Former IDF chief of staff Benny Gantz's Israel Resilience party soared in opinion polls taken Wednesday, a day after he made his first political speech. Two surveys both showed Gantz's party closing in on Netanyahu's Likud, though still 6-9 seats behind; Potentially more significant, one poll showed that an alliance with Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid party would win 35 seats to the Likud's 30.

Ynet

IDF Soldiers Charged with Severely Beating Detainees

A platoon commander and four combat soldiers from the IDF's religious battalion Netzah Yehuda were indicted Thursday for severely beating two Palestinian detainees. The incident took place earlier this month during a manhunt for As'am Barghouti, who shot dead two soldiers from the the same battalion at the Giv'at Asaf outpost said the five soldiers were charged with aggravated abuse and aggravated battery.

Ynet

Coexistence Groups to Lose Funding with Anti-Terror Law

A number of civil society groups in the Palestinian Authority and Israel, who have received grants from the U.S. to promote coexistence, could lose millions of dollars as a result of the debate over the "Anti Terrorism Clarification Act." The ATCA law, passed last year, has raised concerns that it will lead to the end of U.S. security assistance to the PA, and harm Israeli-Palestinian security coordination. However, the PA's interpretation led it no longer accept any form of U.S. assistance. The PA is concerned about facing significant lawsuits, which could go well beyond the funding it receives annually from Washington.

Jerusalem Post

Israel Extends Ban of PA Operations in East Jerusalem

Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan signed an extension of the order preventing the activity of the PA in East Jerusalem on Thursday, based on a recommendation by the Shin Bet and the Israel Police. The order limits the activities of Orient House, a Palestine Liberation Organization base in the 1980s and 1990s. It also limits the operations of the E. Jerusalem Chamber of Commerce, the Supreme Council for the Arab Tourism Industry, the Center for Palestinian Studies, the Palestinian Prisoner Club and the Ministry for Social and Statistical Studies.

Police Probing Bennett's 2012 Party Leadership Bid

Police have been conducting a probe into potential foul play by Education Minister Naftali Bennett during his campaign for leadership of the national-religious Jewish Home party seven years ago, an Israeli newspaper reported Wednesday. Bennett was elected Jewish Home leader in 2012 and led it until last month, when he and Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked announced they were forming the New Right party ahead of the upcoming April elections. Investigators from the Lahav 433 anti-corruption unit are reportedly looking into suspicions that Bennett did not report large sums of money he received for his campaign, as required by law.

Ha'aretz

Ultra-Orthodox Parties Criticize Gantz

Ultra-Orthodox politicians attacked Gantz's speech, claiming that his platform advances civil marriage, a mixed prayer area at the Western Wall, and public transportation on Shabbat. Deputy health minister Yaakov Litzman, chair of the United Torah Judaism party, said Gantz will be implementing an "anti-religious agenda." Still, the ultra-Orthodox parties are not ruling out meeting with Gantz. One source stated that "he isn't Lapid," who has pushed for the ultra-Orthodox community to be drafted to the military, an issue on which Gantz has not yet commented.

Ha'aretz

Livni Launches Campaign Despite Dire Poll Predictions

Hatnuah party leader Tzipi Livni launched her party's campaign on Tuesday. In the 2015 election, Livni's party ran as part of the Zionist Union on a joint slate with the Labor Party. In early January, however, Labor leader Avi Gabbay put an end to the joint slate. Although no other party is currently signaling an interest in joining forces with Livni, she told a Tel Aviv news conference on Tuesday that the possibility is still on the table. "I believe in political blocs and imagine the moment when hope will return to the peace camp, which is currently confused. As soon as that issue is top priority we'll see a very different election campaign here," Livni said.

Ha'aretz

Arab Parties Preparing for Separate Primaries

Two of the Arab-majority parties running as part of the Joint List will finalize the make-up of their slate this week. Hadash and Balad are two of the four factions that make up the Joint List, which is projected to again finish as Israel's third largest party. The factions are still negotiating the terms of their alliance after one of the factions, Ta'al, split off from the party in early January. Hadash, the only Arab-Jewish political party in Israel, will elect six candidates for its ticket on Friday.

With Gantz Soaring, Voters Will Choose Between Benjamins

By Yossi Verter, Senior Columnist

- Twenty-four hours after the maiden political speech given by Benny Gantz, public opinion polls went crazy. According to four polls published yesterday (on Walla, the Israel Television News Company, Channel 13 and Kan public television), Gantz's Hosen L'Yisrael party spiked to an average of 22-23 Knesset seats, an addition of 8-9 seats in comparison to the day before his appearance at Tel Aviv's Convention Center. Regarding suitability as prime minister, Gantz equaled Netanyahu in some of the polls, something we haven't seen for years and which we thought we wouldn't see again in our lifetimes. In a scenario in which Lapid swallows his pride and agrees to merge Yesh Atid with Hosen L'Yisrael, a united centrist party could defeat Likud by 5 seats (35 to 30). Ostensibly, a heretofore sleepy election campaign was revitalized by a retired chief-of-staff who may break Netanyahu's hold on power. Anyone who thought that the initial responses in Likud were exaggerated and alarmist has now understood their meaning. At the prime minister's residence on Balfour Street, where they look at in-depth surveys on a daily basis, the potential for damage was discerned in advance.
- As expected, the growth of Hosen L'Yisrael came almost entirely at the expense of Yesh Atid (now projected to win 10-11 seats, as in the current Knesset) and Labor (projected to win 5-6 seats, closer than ever to being wiped out). The rightist list lining up alongside Gantz is not deterring this electorate. The supreme and foremost goal is to replace Netanyahu. If the trend continues and Gantz makes no mistakes down the road (it's best for him to keep quiet – silence pays), voters on the left-center may vote strategically on April 9: They may move en masse to Gantz, giving him their votes in order to turn him into a rival that can threaten Netanyahu. The slogan will be: it's Benny or Bibi, it's Benjamin A or Benjamin B. In this situation, Hosen L'Yisrael will become a vacuum pump, sucking in voters. The main question which will determine the election results is this: Can Gantz and Ya'alon, perhaps with Gaby Ashkenazi and/or Orli Levi-Abekasis, manage to attract five seats to their camp from the right-wing bloc?
- Another question the answer to which may determine the fate of the campaign is whether one or two of the parties belonging to Netanyahu's bloc, such as Kulanu, Yisrael Beiteinu, Shas or Habayit Hayehudi, will not pass the threshold of 3.25 percent of the vote, or 4 Knesset seats. In that case, Netanyahu will not be able to form a 61-seat majority when appearing before the president, requesting that he be charged with forming a government. Here one should state a cautionary note: Right after Gantz's blitz, with all attention focused on him and with maximal media coverage talking only about his speech, some survey bias is natural. One has to wait a week or two in order to see if the polls were a launching pad or the glass ceiling. We've been there before: In 1999, the now-defunct Hamerkaz (Center) Party, headed by generals Yitzhak Mordechai and Amnon Lipkin-Shahak and by civilians Dan Meridor and Roni Milo, started the campaign with polls giving them 22 seats, only to end up with 6 Knesset seats.

Gantz Takes Position as Netanyahu's Top Rival

By Mazal Mualem, Senior Columnist

- In his maiden political speech on the evening of Jan. 29 at the Tel Aviv Fairgrounds, former army chief Benny Gantz declared himself on live prime-time television as the prime ministerial candidate the center-left will support. Beyond the declarations and commitments to voters as he launched the campaign of his newly minted Israel Resilience Party, Gantz was aiming for a speedy knockout of the other wannabe prime ministers in the political center and on the left. He aspired to position himself firmly as the leading candidate among these parties as he takes on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on April 9. In recent weeks, Gantz was courted by the chair of centrist Yesh Atid, Yair Lapid, who offered him the number-two spot on his Knesset slate, and by Labor leader Avi Gabbay. His appearance this week silenced all speculation that he might team up with anyone and made him a real threat to both parties. Some in Labor had believed they could depose Gabbay and convince Gantz to lead them. “If he says yes, Gabbay will not be able to oppose it,” a senior party figure told AI-Monitor at the time.
- On Tuesday, however, Gantz left Lapid and Gabbay behind, taking up his position at the head of the anti-Netanyahu camp, and the media crowned him Netanyahu’s main rival. Lapid and Gabbay have the most to lose as he forges ahead of them in the polls, and they were silent the next morning as they worked to chart a new course. Since establishing his party, Gantz has spoken little. Those who met with him in recent weeks got the impression of a total lack of political understanding. Until he broke his silence this week, some predicted that the former chief of staff would trip as he left the gate. Gantz, however, came well prepared for his first test. He donned a sharp suit and tie, in marked contrast to his usual casual appearance, and had obviously benefited from some serious coaching to hone his oratorical ability and stage presence.
- Gantz' audience did not have to wait long before he clearly stated that he wants to be prime minister, speaking of “the government under my leadership.” He also let fly a volley of threats, direct and personal, against Israel’s enemies, such as his warning to President Hassan Rouhani: “I know you are plotting to encircle Israel. ... I will thwart your plot.” Gantz also took on Netanyahu, though he mentioned his name only twice. He directed his tough talk against “the government,” but it was clear at whose underbelly he was aiming his arrows. Invoking Louis XIV, Gantz recalled that there was once a king who declared, “I am the state.” No, said Gantz, “not here. No Israeli leader is a king. The state is not me. The state is you. ... The state is all of us.” Obviously, he was referring to the investigations into suspected corruption in the Netanyahu family and juicy tales from the prime minister’s residence.
- According to political sources, the speech took a long time to compose. Lines were written and deleted at dizzying speed. Its content bore the hallmarks of the political center. The text was tailored for supporters of the right and peace lovers on the left and for those fed up with

corruption to make Gantz Netanyahu's only rival on April 9. Gantz and his people know that he is not operating in a vacuum on the center-left, and from the get-go they went for an image of Gantz going head-to-head against Netanyahu, borne by a momentum of change and transformation. Gantz lived up to expectations, projecting a clean, new and fresh persona. In so doing, he might have surprised Lapid, who had still held out hope of a joint run.

- Gantz also made the surprising decision to team up with former Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon, a former Likud minister to whom he promised the number-two slot on his Knesset slate and two slots for candidates of his choosing among the top 10 on the slate. The two slots have been promised to right-wing commentator Yoaz Hendel and former Cabinet Secretary and Likud member Zvi Hauser — both of whom used to work for Netanyahu. The choice provides Gantz with a seal of approval as he eyes voters on the moderate right. His photo with Ya'alon — two former army leaders, one of whom also served as defense minister, was designed to wipe out Netanyahu's advantage as an authority on defense matters.
- A new political game has now begun. Gantz is no longer just a target of vitriol from the right that started even before his first speech. He is also a rival of Gabbay and even of Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon, chair of the center-right Kulanu, but foremost of Lapid. The more he forges ahead of him in the polls, the louder the calls will be for Lapid to team up with Gantz for the greater good: bringing down the Netanyahu regime. Another general, former Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi, has been shuttling back and forth between the two and is expected to keep conditioning his entry into politics on a union between Gantz and Lapid, for which he would be willing to set aside his ego and accept the number-three spot.
- For now Lapid is standing firm, having predicted the turn of events in recent days — that the long-anticipated Gantz speech would create initial momentum in his favor. Lapid is also aiming for the premiership, even if it entails another term in the Knesset opposition. He knows that joining Gantz would kill his dream. For years, Lapid has built up his party into a well-oiled machine. He enjoys a loyal following that guarantees him eight or nine Knesset seats, and he has both tremendous ambition and patience. He will wait several days, assess his situation and the extent of the damage he has suffered in the latest polls and then decide on a new strategy.
- The most significant element of Gantz' campaign launch was his direct and unambiguous entry into the arena against Netanyahu. The speech he delivered was designed to convey one clear message — here is a man running to be prime minister. Having gotten his feet wet, Gantz will now have to navigate carefully through the next two months, an eternity in an election campaign. Both the right and left will come for him. It will be tough, different from any battle he has known. In the coming days, the fight for leadership of the anti-Netanyahu camp will play out and determine whether the April 9 fight will be between Benny and Bibi.