



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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Headlines:

- **US Military Moving Equipment Out of Syria as Pullout Begins**
- **Turkey Issues Ultimatum to Trump: Pull Out of Syria or We Strike**
- **Israel Opens Segregated West Bank Highway Near Jerusalem**
- **PLO Calls for UN to Restore 'Zionism is Racism' Resolution**
- **Pompeo Promises 'Every Last Iranian Boot' Expelled from Syria**
- **Israel Fighter Jet Sale to Croatia Fails After US Objections**
- **Gabbay Booed at Labor Party Convention, Solidifies Power as Chairman**
- **'New Right' Unveils Former IDF Combat Pilot as Candidate**

Commentary:

- **New York Times: "The Inevitable, Necessary Death of Israel's Labor Party"**
 - By Shmuel Rosner, contributing opinion writer
- **Ha'aretz: "Netanyahu's Top Rival Has Found a Way to Psych Out the Prime Minister"**
 - By Yossi Verter, political commentator at Ha'aretz

News Excerpts

January 11, 2019

Times of Israel

US Military Moving Equipment Out of Syria as Pullout Begins

The US military has removed some equipment from Syria, a defense official confirmed Thursday, following a report that the pullout ordered by President Donald Trump is now underway. “I can confirm the movement of equipment from Syria,” the official told AFP. “For security reasons, I am not going to provide further details at this time.” Trump’s shock announcement on December 19 that he was withdrawing all 2,000 American troops from the conflict-wracked Middle Eastern country has led to concern among allies, including Israel, and prompted the resignation of his then defense chief Jim Mattis. See also, [“US military removes some equipment from Syria: official” \(AFP\)](#)

Ha’aretz

Turkey Issues Ultimatum to Trump: Pull Out of Syria or We Strike

A military operation against the Kurdish YPG militia, which Turkey has pledged to carry out in northern Syria, is not dependent on a U.S. pull-out from the region, Turkey’s Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on Thursday. “If the [pullout] is put off with ridiculous excuses like Turks are massacring Kurds, which do not reflect the reality, we will implement this decision,” Çavuşoğlu said, referring to Turkey’s threat to launch an incursion into Kurdish controlled Syria. In an interview with broadcaster NTV, Cavusoglu said it was not realistic to expect the United States to fully collect weapons it gave to its YPG ally, which Ankara views as a terrorist group. See also, [“Trump unleashes Erdogan’s inner minefield on Syria” \(Washington Examiner\)](#)

Ynet News

Israel Opens Segregated West Bank Highway Near Jerusalem

Israel inaugurated a new highway in the West Bank on Thursday that features a large concrete wall segregating Israeli and Palestinian traffic. One side of Route 4370—located northeast of Jerusalem—will be open to Israeli vehicles only, while the other half will only be open to Palestinian traffic. Critics have branded it an “apartheid” highway, saying it is part of a segregated road system that benefits Jewish settlers. The highway was built as part of a planned ring road east of Jerusalem that would connect the northern and southern West Bank. Construction began in 2005, but the 5-kilometer (3-mile) road lay unfinished for years until 2017. See also, [“New Jerusalem ‘Apartheid Road’ Opens, Separating Palestinians and Jewish Settlers” \(Ha’arertz\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

PLO Calls for UN to Restore ‘Zionism is Racism’ Resolution

The United Nations must restore the defunct resolution declaring that “Zionism is racism,” the Palestinian Authority said on Thursday, in response to Israel’s opening of an “apartheid road” in the West Bank outside of Jerusalem. “To all those who are defending the state of occupation, it’s time to drop the claim that its the only democracy in the Middle East now that it has opened the apartheid road, which separates Israeli and Palestinian drivers,” PLO Executive Committee member Ahmed Majdalani said. He spoke just one day after Israel formally opened the first section of the Eastern Ring Road in the Ma’aleh Adumim bloc. See also, [“New Road’s Separation Wall Gets Mixed Reception” \(Hamodia\)](#)

Pompeo Promises 'Every Last Iranian Boot' Expelled from Syria

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo vowed Thursday the United States and its allies would work diplomatically to expel all Iranian troops from Syria, urging Middle East nations to forge a common stand against Tehran. "It's time for old rivalries to end, for the sake of the greater good of the region," said Pompeo at a keynote address in Cairo. America "will use diplomacy and work with our partners to expel every last Iranian boot" from Syria and bolster efforts "to bring peace and stability to the long-suffering Syrian people," he added. The top US diplomat was in Egypt on the latest leg of a whistle-stop regional tour aimed at shoring up Washington's Middle East policy following US President Donald Trump's shock decision to withdraw 2,000 US troops from Syria. See also, ["U.S. Will Work to Expel 'Every Last Iranian Boot' From Syria, Pompeo Says in Cairo" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Ynet News

Israel Fighter Jet Sale to Croatia Fails After US Objections

Israel has failed to overcome US objections to its plan to sell 12 used fighter jets to Croatia and the \$500 million deal will likely be canceled, Croatia's defense minister said Thursday. Israel reached a tentative deal to sell the upgraded F-16 Barak fighters to Croatia in March pending US approval that would allow the American-made technology to be purchased by a third party. The deal ran into trouble after Washington said that Israel needs to strip off the upgrades that were added to the aircraft after Israel took delivery from the US some 30 years ago. Croatian Defense Minister said after meeting with Israeli officials in Zagreb on Thursday that "despite accepted obligations," Israel failed to obtain the needed consent and his ministry "will propose to the government to make appropriate decisions."

Ha'aretz

Gabbay Boomed at Party Convention, Solidifies Power as Chairman

Thousands of activists attended the Labor Party's conference on Thursday in Tel Aviv, the first since the Zionist Union alliance fell apart after Labor chairman Avi Gabbay broke with Tzipi Livni's Hatnuah party last week ahead of the upcoming election. Attendants of the conference boomed Gabbay and one of his opponents had to be dragged out of the hall, but others received him warmly and hailed him as "the next prime minister." Nevertheless, his opponents proved weak and motions to remove him were defeated. Gabbay won all the procedural motions he tabled, first and foremost winning a vote for key slots on the party list to be reserved for candidates of his choosing, the second, 10th and 16th place on the slate. Some polls have shown the party will win enough Knesset seats for these slots to get elected. See also, ["Over booms and whistles, Gabbay tells angry, divided Labor he can beat Netanyahu" \(TOI\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

'New Right' Unveils Former IDF Combat Pilot as Candidate

The New Right has announced its next candidate for the new party's list: Matan Kahana, who served in the IDF for 28 years and was released last August. Kahana is a former combat pilot and was commander of the F-16 squadron. He is also a graduate of the elite commando unit Sayeret Matkal, where he started his military career and where he served along Naftali Bennett in the early 90s. Education Minister Naftali Bennett and Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked broke off from Bayit Yehudi in December to form their own right-wing political party. Kahana is the fifth member of The New Right, after Jerusalem Post contributor Caroline Glick and the first-ever deaf candidate for Knesset Shirley Pinto joined Bennett and Shaked over the last weeks.

The Inevitable, Necessary Death of Israel's Labor Party

By Shmuel Rosner, contributing opinion writer

- **Political parties have a tendency to hold on for a while even after they are no longer useful. But sometimes, you have to recognize that it's time to say goodbye. With Israel's April 9 general election fast approaching, Israelis can finally say farewell to the Labor Party and the Jewish Home Party.**
- **In Israel, nearly every election sees the birth and death of political parties. This year's will be no different. But the two parties that could meet their demise aren't newcomers or hastily cobbled together coalitions. Labor is the heir to the party that founded Israel — David Ben-Gurion's party, which ruled the country for its first three decades. Jewish Home is heir to the Zionist-religious parties that were members of most Israeli governing coalitions since Israel's birth. Both are in serious trouble. An average of recent polls shows that Labor, once a party fighting Likud for political pre-eminence, will take only about eight seats in the Knesset; Jewish Home is predicted to win fewer than four seats, the minimum required of any party to get into the Knesset.**
- **How did they get here? It is easy to focus on the petty problems that put them in such a dire position. A year and a half ago, Labor Party members elected a leader who does not have the charisma necessary for the job. A month ago, Jewish Home was unceremoniously abandoned by its two popular ministers and is still trying to pick up the pieces. But the problems these parties face are not temporary hiccups. They result from a major change in Israel's social and political landscape.**
- **In late 2017, under the auspices of The Jewish People Policy Institute, I teamed up with Prof. Camil Fuchs of Tel Aviv University, one of Israel's leading pollsters, to study Israeli Judaism. (At the end of 2018, we published a book.) Our findings provide a window through which to understand how Israel is changing — and to explain what might be happening in this election cycle.**
- **The most significant finding in our study is that 55 percent of Israeli Jews belong to a group whose like-minded identity we call "Jewish-Israeli." This runs counter to the conventional wisdom, which holds that Israel is divided between left and right, and secular and religious groups. These Jews' identity is, in many ways, a new brand of Judaism born from mixing a strong affinity for Jewish traditions and a national sentiment in a way that makes the two almost indistinguishable. For example, they are Jews who keep a kosher home and send their children to serve in the military; they put up an Israeli flag on Independence Day and celebrate their son's bar mitzvah. This is not about religiosity; it is about culture — a culture whose pillars are ancient Judaism and modern Israelism. This group also shares some core beliefs about politics, including a realization that peace in the Middle East won't happen any time soon.**
- **This demographic is the key to understanding Israel's political system because it is the group that all parties need to win over if they want to control the government. A successful political party today has to offer a Jewishly flavored Israeli patriotism. Other parties battling to represent the political center in Israel — such as Yesh Atid and Kulanu — succeed in attracting this pool of "Jewish-Israelis."**

- But the Labor Party is chained to its historical role as the party of a patriotic, nontraditional Israelism. It is the party formed by a generation of pioneers who cast aside traditional Jewish practice and aimed to create a new Jew, a Jew whose connection to a Jewish past and whose tendency to perform Jewish practice is relatively weak. Today, this population is small in number and seems to be shrinking. But Labor continues to cater to it, and to some of the dwindling pool of people who still have hope for a peace process. This still allows for political survival (our study identified a group of about 15 percent of Israelis who score high on Israeli patriotism and low on Jewish tradition) but it isn't enough to win an election.
- Jewish Home is in trouble for a somewhat similar reason. Its forebears, the Mizrahi and National Religious parties, emerged when the state was founded as the political home for religious Zionists, a relatively powerless minority at the time. This minority needed a party to protect its interests, to make sure its religious schools were funded, to represent its ideology. But today, this group no longer feels that it is a fragile minority. Its voters are a part of the "Jewish-Israeli" mainstream and they have representatives in many parties.
- The two leaders who abandoned Jewish Home seem to understand the changing trends. They decided to create a party called New Right, including both religious and secular Israelis, much like the other main party on the right, Likud. The leaders of Israel's other centrist parties also demonstrate their instinctive understanding of the changing trends when they all (at least for now) resist the pressure to join forces with Labor.
- When a political party outlives its usefulness, it becomes a distraction. Political energy goes to waste on platforms that are no longer necessary. A new reality, including a new culture, demands a new platform. Israel's new reality is this: Israeli Jews are much more in agreement about basic ideals than meets the eye. We are dominated by "Jewish-Israelis." And so it should be no surprise that the parties established to represent other portions of the electorate — outdated portions — are losing steam. Moving forward without them would not be a great loss.

SUMMARY: In Israel, nearly every election sees the birth and death of political parties. This year's will be no different. But the two parties that could meet their demise aren't newcomers or hastily cobbled together coalitions. Labor is the heir to the party that founded Israel — David Ben-Gurion's party, which ruled the country for its first three decades. Jewish Home is heir to the Zionist-religious parties that were members of most Israeli governing coalitions since Israel's birth. Both are in serious trouble. An average of recent polls shows that Labor, once a party fighting Likud for political pre-eminence, will take only about eight seats in the Knesset; Jewish Home is predicted to win fewer than four seats, the minimum required of any party to get into the Knesset. How did they get here? It is easy to focus on the petty problems that put them in such a dire position. A year and a half ago, Labor Party members elected a leader who does not have the charisma necessary for the job. A month ago, Jewish Home was unceremoniously abandoned by its two popular ministers and is still trying to pick up the pieces. But the problems these parties face are not temporary hiccups. They result from a major change in Israel's social and political landscape.

Netanyahu's Top Rival Has Found a Way to Psych Out the Prime Minister

By Yossi Verter, political commentator at Ha'aretz

- Without a doubt, these are good days for Benny Gantz. From his hiding places between his home in Rosh Ha'ayin and his office in Tel Aviv, he is enjoying the fruits of his labors without laboring. His prolonged silence is serving him well. His handsome face, which exudes calm, peers at us from every newspaper and on every website, as if to say: Relax, it'll be fine, Daddy's here. There's not a newscast that doesn't deal with him, in a tone somewhere between neutral and positive. The "negative" is usually pretty lame and mostly serves him.
- For example, when, by order of the Balfour Street war room, Science Minister Ofir Akunis (Likud) spews out the recycled lie that Gantz's wife, Revital, is a member of a left-wing organization – the bluff is exposed immediately and everything rebounds back on the fabricator. When Culture Minister Miri Regev (Likud), who is a character-defamation pro, is contemptuous of Gantz's military skills, as though she were some sort of Mrs. von Clausewitz – she exposes the fears of the person who dispatched her.
- And when Yoav Gallant (ex-Kulanu, now Likud and immigrant absorption minister), the new toy on Benjamin Netanyahu's desk, mutters about Gantz – with an "if looks could kill" expression – that, "He knows why he's keeping quiet" – everyone understands that this is the dowry he's paying to the individual who welcomed him to Likud with open arms and intends to help him in the primary.
- Gantz has not been harmed by all this noise. A midweek poll on Channel 10 found that he's running almost neck-and-neck with Netanyahu on the question of suitability for prime minister: 38 percent vs. 41 percent for the incumbent. That figure reflects a groundswell of support for Gantz that virtually spans the entire center-left bloc, in the face of a similar picture vis-a-vis Netanyahu in the rival camp.
- It's hard not to imagine a situation in which Gantz keeps his political virginity until, say, four weeks before the April 9 Election Day. And then, with the other contestants sprawled on the floor, battered and exhausted, he launches a blitz of speeches at well-organized rallies packed with fans. He gives only a few interviews to select journalists, in which he declaims measured, meticulously vetted messages. And thus he dances his way to the polling stations: clean, pure, starched and exuding a fresh scent of anemones. Sorry – roses.
- That's a tempting scenario, but not a realistic one. As of this weekend, Gantz plan is to launch his campaign and deliver his debut speech during the second half of January. Next week, he has scheduled a short meeting with a Druze delegation that is making the rounds and conferring with various party leaders to ask them to amend the nation-state law. Gantz will no doubt talk about how wonderful their community is, about the "covenant of blood" with Jewish Israelis and so on. That will be the appetizer before the main course.
- The campaign kickoff speech is in the works. Draft follows draft. He will talk a good deal about "unity." One idea raised in his circle is for him to sell himself as the head of a national unity government that will be formed after the election, one representing a broad consensus. In our

factionalized political arena today, everyone is disqualifying everyone else: Yair Lapid and Avi Gabbay and Tzipi Livni nix Netanyahu; Moshe Kahlon and Avigdor Lieberman veto Gabbay; the far right disqualifies the far left; Yaakov Litzman excludes Lapid and so on. Gantz will try to persuade the public that on his watch, it will be possible to ingather most of these parties to form one coalition.

- The problem lies in the follow-up to that declaration. The first question he'll be asked will be: if you support unity so much, would you be ready to serve in a Netanyahu government? Thus far, Lapid (Yesh Atid), Gabbay (Labor) and Livni (Hatnuah) have rejected that option – but Gantz won't rule it out. He'll circle around the dialogue, say that he intends to win and the like, but we won't hear a nyet from him. He's not out to warm a chair in the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. He's aiming for a senior ministerial portfolio – defense or foreign affairs (and what's wrong with education, he has said to interlocutors) – and for maximum influence.
- It's clear to Gantz that the 12 to 14 seats his party, Hosen L'Yisrael, is getting in the polls don't put him in the ballpark of being the one to form the next government. He's waiting for one of the two other former Israel Defense Forces chiefs of staff – Gabi Ashkenazi and Moshe Ya'alon (with a clear preference for the former) – and for the independent MK Orli Levi-Abekasis, who has reestablished her father's Geshet party: Gantz apparently believes that having another IDF chief by his side, along with a social-justice symbol who also happens to be a Mizrahi woman, could help catapult him to the top.
- Meanwhile, he is exerting heavy pressure on Ashkenazi – on an almost daily basis. They were never good buddies, but Gantz sees Ashkenazi as having vast importance: Ashkenazi completes him, bolsters him and makes up for his weaknesses; he's from the Golani infantry brigade, he's a Mizrahi and he can garner votes in realms where Gantz will have a hard time breaching the walls.
- Gantz would love to see Ashkenazi and Levi-Abekasis by his side at his party launch, but it's going to take time. They'll want to see him enter the kitchen, withstand the heat, and absorb the inevitable flood of vilification and bad-mouthing – without flinching. Ashkenazi certainly doesn't have to be in any hurry. He's flying solo. As far as he's concerned, there's no need to hurry before the deadline for submission of party slates – February 22. If Lapid weakens and gets a good offer from Gantz, Ashkenazi will offer himself as No. 3 on the party's list, maybe No. 4. He has long since abandoned the dream of conquering the summit, but hasn't relinquished the dream of seeing the guy that's on top today descend from it.
- Elections in Israel are determined in the security-diplomatic realm. That's the prevailing assumption and it will probably hold this time as well. As long as there are four seething fronts – Gaza, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank – the vote of many citizens will be dictated by security concerns. With Gantz and Ashkenazi in the picture, the question of whether there's someone to answer the red phone when it rings at 3 A.M., with the air force or Mossad chief on the line, becomes superfluous. This will be the first campaign in a decade in which Netanyahu, who has accumulated respectable mileage in office, will be challenged by a figure, maybe two, with inarguable security credentials. In this militaristic country, if you've been chief of staff you don't have to prove anything. All you have to do is show up.
- Yitzhak Rabin in 1992 and Ehud Barak in 1999, respectively, defeated two Likud prime ministers, Yitzhak Shamir and Benjamin Netanyahu. Their security aura and unchallenged military records allowed both of them to conduct a campaign without resorting to justifications or self-defense,

and enabled them to respond to other concerns of the public. Rabin harped on the governmental corruption that had spread under Likud (with a slogan declaring that the public was fed up with the party's corrupt ways). Barak felt sufficiently confident of his rank and medals to emphasize social issues such as the overcrowding in hospitals.

- Election campaigns are for the most part decided on a single issue (in Israel it's usually security-diplomatic, but now only security, because diplomacy is out). But still, something more is needed, one more thing to tip the scales. Accordingly, Gantz intends to focus on social issues. On traffic jams, overcrowding in hospitals, inequality, children living in poverty, Israel's shameful place as the poorest country in the OECD. He will explain to Israelis that even though things aren't so bad here, they would be a lot better off with a change in the order of priorities.
- Still, 2019 is not 1999 or 1992. Israeli society has undergone substantial, deep changes in the past decade. It has become more right-wing and more extreme, racist, religious and violent. Gantz's hope of fomenting a turnabout under the existing circumstances is a pipe dream
- Deep down, he surely realizes this. Like the other players in the opposition and the coalition, in the right, the left and the center, Gantz is looking ahead to the battle after the war. When the attorney general decides, as now appears probable, to indict Netanyahu on corruption charges following a hearing. When the cards are re-dealt, Gantz be there at the table, with a parliamentary faction that has political and perhaps also ministerial experience, and on his shoulders the insignia whose luster shall not dim.

SUMMARY: Elections in Israel are determined in the security-diplomatic realm. That's the prevailing assumption and it will probably hold this time as well. As long as there are four seething fronts – Gaza, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank – the vote of many citizens will be dictated by security concerns. With Gantz and Ashkenazi in the picture, the question of whether there's someone to answer the red phone when it rings at 3 A.M., with the air force or Mossad chief on the line, becomes superfluous. This will be the first campaign in a decade in which Netanyahu, who has accumulated respectable mileage in office, will be challenged by a figure, maybe two, with inarguable security credentials. In this militaristic country, if you've been chief of staff you don't have to prove anything. All you have to do is show up.