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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

February 1, 2019

Jerusalem Post

ISIS Could Regain Control Of Syria Within a Year: Pentagon

ISIS could regain control of Syrian territory within six to 12 months, according to a draft of the Department of Defense Inspector General Quarterly Report on the ongoing Syrian situation. Analysts fear the impending pullout of US troops would create a vacuum filled by the extremist group. US President Donald Trump has ordered all of the approximately 3,000 US troops to leave the civil war-torn country within 120 days. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria gained infamy in 2014 with terrorist attacks, beheadings and public proclamations of a worldwide Islamic caliphate. NBC News reported Friday that the draft indicates "ISIS is intent on reconstituting a physical caliphate and that with ungoverned areas in Syria and no military pressure, the group could retake land in a matter of months."

Ynet News

Despite Int' Disapproval, Lebanon Forms Govt' with Hezbollah

Lebanese political factions agreed finally Thursday on the formation of a new government, breaking a nine-month deadlock that only deepened the country's economic woes. Rival political groups have been locked in disagreement over the make-up of a new government since May, after the country's first parliamentary elections in nine years. The breakthrough comes after rival factions worked out a compromise allowing representation of Sunni lawmakers backed by the powerful Shiite group Hezbollah. Celebrations broke out after the announcement, including huge fireworks that lit up the Beirut sky. The new government will be headed by Saad Hariri, who headed the outgoing government.

Ha'aretz

Erekat to UN: Prevent Israel From Expelling Monitoring Force

Saeb Erekat, secretary general of the PLO executive committee, called on the UN Thursday to prevent Israel from expelling the international body of observers, Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH), from the West Bank city, after Prime Minister Netanyahu decided earlier in the week not to extend the organization's mandate. Erekat called a press conference at the PLO headquarters in Ramallah and said the Palestinian Authority is talking with the UN and with the five nations comprising TIPH, namely Italy, Sweden, Turkey, Switzerland and Norway, to prevent implementation of the Israeli decision. "These nations must decide if Israel is above international law. It cannot do as it pleases in the international arena and not honor extant, signed agreements," Erekat said.

Times of Israel

Coalition of Israelis Working to Beat Election Cyber Bots

A recent event in which journalists received fake news to their twitter accounts has become a cause celebre of attempts to propagate fake news in Israel through bots. A coalition of Israeli diplomats, programmers and hackers have joined forces to stave off threats — including from hostile states — by identifying networks on social media and getting them removed. In some cases, disinformation makes its way from social to professional media. "We blocked that within 24 hours by contacting them (the account holder) directly," said Elad Ratson, a Foreign Ministry diplomat who spearheads Israel's efforts against fake news bots.

Gantz on Par with Netanyahu in Latest Leadership Polls

Former IDF chief and political newcomer Benny Gantz got a boost in the polls two days after giving his first political speech and joining forces with another former IDF commander, Moshe Ya'alon. Gantz is now on par with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has so far been poised to win the premiership in the April 9 vote. When asked who is the most suitable candidate to be prime minister, a poll by Reshet Channel 13 News puts Gantz and Netanyahu at 42 percent each. A poll conducted by Keshet Channel 12 News puts Netanyahu slightly ahead, with 36% compared to Gantz's 35%, while a poll done by the Israel Public Broadcasting Corporation (IPBC) shows a bigger gap, with the prime minister getting 47% compared to Gantz's 41%. Gantz's Israel Resilience Party went up in the polls as well, and it is now trailing Netanyahu's Likud Party by a single-digit number of seats, with one poll predicting a six-seat difference and two others putting the two parties eight or nine seats apart.

Dutch-Palestinian Sues Gantz in Hague for War Crimes in 2014

Benny Gantz will already be a member of Knesset or maybe even a government minister when he, or someone on his behalf, asks a court in The Hague to dismiss the civil suit against him for killing six Gazan residents on July 20, 2014. The plaintiff is Ismail Ziada, a Dutch citizen born in the Gazan refugee camp of Al Bureij. His claim against Gantz, the army chief of staff during Operation Protective Edge, and against Amir Eshel, the commander of the Israeli Air Force at the time, was filed in late March 2018. It holds them responsible for the bombing of his family's home in Bureij, and for the deaths of his mother, three siblings, and a nephew. A guest in their home during the air raid was also killed.

Israeli-Pal' Security Ties Likely to Continue Despite US Aid Freeze

Israeli and Palestinian officials on Thursday signaled that security coordination between them will continue, despite a midnight deadline that cuts off all US assistance to the Palestinians. Security cooperation in the West Bank is one of the few remaining areas of contact between Israel and President Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian Authority after years of otherwise rocky ties, with both sides joined in a common struggle against Hamas. This coordination has been thrown into doubt by a law that requires the US to cut off its financial assistance to the Palestinians, including millions of dollars in security aid, as of midnight Friday. While all sides agree the coordination is beneficial, it was doubtful the issue would be resolved before the deadline. Still, there were no signs that the behind-the-scenes cooperation would end.

AG Maldelblit Expected not to Postpone Netanyahu's Hearing

Attorney -General Avichai Mandelblit and his team had finished reviewing the legal materials related to the investigations of alleged corruption of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Maariv reported on Thursday. Mandelbit is expected to refuse holding off the hearing until April, when the elections are due to take place. "In the most crucial decision in the history of Israeli law, a process that should take 20 months is being squeezed to a few days," the Prime Minister's office said. "It seems the A.G. gave in to the pressure used by the left and the media to indict Prime Minister Netanyahu at all cost - ahead of elections," the statement went on to say.

Here's Why U.S. Aid to Palestinians Needs To Continue

By Dana Stroul, fellow at the Washington Institute and Daniel B. Shapiro, former U.S. ambassador to Israel

- **Is U.S. assistance to the Palestinians an indulgence we can do without? Will its elimination leave Israelis, Palestinians and U.S. interests better off? Unless Congress and the Trump administration act quickly, we are about to find out.**
- **Since 1993, the United States has provided more than \$5 billion in assistance to the West Bank and Gaza. This generous program continued across Republican and Democratic administrations, with bipartisan Congressional support, despite ups and downs in the peace process, spikes and drops in violence and frustrations in Washington and Jerusalem with Palestinian leaders. But the whole enterprise is now in jeopardy.**
- **First, the Trump Administration cut the entire fiscal year 2017 economic aid program for the West Bank and Gaza and looks likely to do the same for fiscal 2018. Now the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) mission, with no money to spend, is on the verge of closing down, leaving ongoing projects uncompleted. Next, the Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act, which exposes the Palestinian Authority to legal action in U.S. courts if it accepts any U.S. assistance funds, comes into force on Feb. 1.**
- **The ATCA's passage last year prompted Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah (who resigned Tuesday) to inform Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in a late-December letter that the Palestinian Authority will no longer accept any U.S. assistance. If carried out, that will end U.S. assistance for the Palestinian Authority Security Forces, the deliberately under-the-radar and largely successful U.S. effort to develop these forces and facilitate effective security coordination with Israel in the West Bank.**
- **It will also eliminate the role of the U.S. security coordinator, a three-star general who oversees the training of the security forces and serves as a liaison between Israeli and Palestinian security officials. Thus far, there has been minimal debate in Washington over the implications of these developments on stability in the West Bank and Gaza and the inextricable link to Israel's security. Nor has there been a sober reckoning of the very real implications for U.S. influence.**
- **It's easy to be cavalier about these programs, considering the moribund peace process, Palestinian leaders who lack legitimacy with much of the U.S. public, and bouts of violence. But members of Congress, including many of Israel's strongest supporters on both sides of the aisle, have long understood their value. While oversight has been rigorous, funding for Palestinian assistance programs has always flowed with bipartisan support because it was determined to reinforce Israel's security and provide a measure of U.S. leverage and influence.**
- **This logic was ratified by the support of the Israeli government for these programs. Israeli authorities understood that a breakdown in security, an economic collapse or a humanitarian crisis in the West Bank would place an enormous burden on Israel. A crisis in the West Bank could require the Israel Defense Forces to redeploy personnel from other high-risk areas like the Lebanon border or the Golan Heights. Moreover, U.S. assistance has sustained lines of contact with Palestinian officials. During flare-ups and crises, this connective tissue has placed the U.S. in a position to defuse situations when direct Israeli-Palestinian engagement was too**

difficult. U.S. Security Coordinator Lt. Gen. Eric Wendt and his predecessors have at times been the only American officials able to bridge both sides in moments of high tension.

- The current funding crisis runs contrary to clearly expressed Congressional intent. Last year, large bipartisan majorities passed the Taylor Force Act, which, by withholding some U.S. aid, aimed to compel the Palestinian Authority to end, among other things, its practice of providing payments to families of convicted Palestinian terrorists. But Congress also voted resoundingly to maintain key elements of assistance, including humanitarian aid, people-to-people programs, medical services and other programming with no direct connection to the Palestinian Authority.
- The Israeli government, for its part, was clear in its support for the Taylor Force Act's intent of ending U.S. assistance that could even indirectly subsidize the Palestinian Authority's payments to terrorists' families. But there was never Israeli support for curtailing the accounts Congress protected — programs acknowledged to maintain a modicum of stability in the West Bank and prevent a full-scale humanitarian crisis in either the West Bank or Gaza. In other words, the Taylor Force Act's passage underscored bipartisan Congressional support for continuing U.S. assistance to the Palestinians. Trump officials, who took an axe to the entire program, citing the Taylor Force Act, have misinterpreted the meaning of the law.
- The Israeli national security establishment remains painfully aware that it will face the burden — financial, security, and otherwise — of addressing a full-scale collapse in the West Bank or Gaza if the U.S. steps away or loses all influence and credibility with the Palestinians. And if they lose cooperation with the Palestinian security forces, Israeli security forces will find themselves in the far worse position of needing to directly intervene to confront security threats in Palestinian-populated areas, rather than working through the U.S.-funded multilateral construct.
- If all parties remain stuck on the current course, the biggest losers will be innocent Palestinian civilians and Israel. The winners are those benefiting from instability and the opportunity to point to the U.S. as unreliable and in retreat from the Middle East: Hamas, other assorted terrorists and Iran. To reverse the current course, here are some steps that the administration and Congress should urgently undertake:
 - Fix the Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act

A straightforward legislative fix is low-hanging fruit. Congressional and administration staff recognize that ending U.S. security assistance to the Palestinian security forces only helps adversaries and empowers enemies. In recent days, Israel belatedly added its voice, making clear it wants U.S. aid to the PASF to continue. In fact, Congress and the administration should go further and seize the opportunity in this crisis to permanently protect U.S. security assistance to the Palestinian security forces.
 - Mitigate damage

Walking away from ongoing USAID projects in the West Bank and Gaza — unfinished roads, incomplete water projects, and piecemeal humanitarian and education programs — is a total waste of U.S. taxpayer dollars. Such visible reminders of U.S. abandonment will also inflame local sentiment against the United States. Congress should authorize and explicitly appropriate funds to complete these projects, following a thorough review of the status of U.S. programs in the West Bank and Gaza.
 - Pass positive legislative alternatives

Even if traditional assistance programs remain blocked, there are creative legislative proposals that preserve space for U.S. influence and enjoy bipartisan support. The Palestinian Partnership Fund Act, introduced in the last Congress, promotes economic development by connecting Palestinian entrepreneurs and companies with counterparts in the U.S., Israel, and the Middle East. An International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, long advocated by the nonpartisan Alliance for Middle East Peace, has enjoyed bipartisan support in past Congresses and would promote people-to-people peace-building activities by pooling funding from government and private sources. Now is the time for Congress to approve funding for it.

- **Urge Israeli clarification on U.S. assistance**

Members of Congress naturally seek Israel's views on the security and economic consequences of completely shutting down U.S. assistance programs to the Palestinians. But during the Trump administration, the answers have been murky. After Israel's election in April, Congress should urgently seek a clear picture of the new government's views, as members continue to vote on this much-debated set of issues.

SUMMARY: The Israeli national security establishment remains painfully aware that it will face the burden – financial, security, and otherwise – of addressing a full-scale collapse in the West Bank or Gaza if the U.S. steps away or loses all influence and credibility with the Palestinians. And if they lose cooperation with the Palestinian security forces, Israeli security forces will find themselves in the far worse position of needing to directly intervene to confront security threats in Palestinian-populated areas, rather than working through the U.S.-funded multilateral construct. If all parties remain stuck on the current course, the biggest losers will be innocent Palestinian civilians and Israel. The winners are those benefiting from instability and the opportunity to point to the U.S. as unreliable and in retreat from the Middle East: Hamas, other assorted terrorists and Iran.

Last Gantz Saloon

After a speech that ticked all the right boxes, made all the right noises and even included a contradictory statement or two, the former IDF chief still has to persuade voters that he is a fresh voice and time is running out.

By Limor Livnat, former Minister of Education

- **Benny Gantz certainly put on a good show on Tuesday night. He looks good, he knows how to make a good impression, and his advisers seem to be acting on the assumption that this is all that matters in the modern era of big screens, small screens, viral videos and showmanship. That's how we ended up with a well-honed, genetically engineered speech. It really was the Dolly the sheep of addresses: it ticked all the boxes, was well-rehearsed and threw out one cliché after another. But underneath it all, what was actually there?**
- **There was, in particular, a very conspicuous attempt not to fall into the trap laid by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the rest of the Likud members, who are chanting the mantra that "Gantz is left-wing." They accuse him of being on the left? He will prove otherwise: he will color his campaign khaki; he will release videos with militaristic overtones; he will extol his death toll; he will threaten Iran's Rouhani, Hezbollah's Nasrallah and Hamas' Sinwar.**
- **Gantz's people made sure he was photographed gazing into the middle distance, where one can find Yair Lapid's voters, the sinking ship that is the Labor party, and the soft right. This is where he is apparently hoping to pick up four or five Knesset seats, if only he can prove that he is not left-wing. But what did he say? The real question is, what didn't he say – for there was hardly any subject left untouched and or without a commitment to speedily resolve it, even if it went against all logic. How can we "deepen our partnership with the ultra-Orthodox," and at the same time "advance civil unions and the Western Wall egalitarian prayer section?" One cannot resolve these two contradictions, but there they both were in the same speech.**
- **So what was missing? Well, there were no Mizrahi (Eastern) Jews and no women. With a couple of exceptions, Gantz's list of Ashkenazi men is being formulated as if this were not the year 2019. It is very nice to declare in a speech that "we will fight against the exclusion of women " and vow to "smash all the glass ceilings that prevent women from having true equality," but who will believe him when the list he himself put together has no women, and is far from smashing any glass ceilings? Again, his statements and his actions are operating in isolation from one another.**
- **Not everything was bad, heaven forbid. His consultants knew exactly how to inject Gantz's speech with witty, pointed and cutting soundbites that were music to the ears of his potential voters. He should also be commended for having silenced the angry voices in the audience in a confident and authoritative manner. When he stepped down from the stage for a moment and went to shake the hand of an audience member, it was a wonderfully scripted move that really presented him in a positive light.**
- **Gantz steps well into the character of the savior-candidate. His confident step and sometimes embarrassed demeanor lend him the charm and grace of someone who is not a politician. This works well for a retired chief of staff who wants to take a few more seats in the polls, as was seen this week, but it is not enough for a prime minister. Gantz has not done enough to convince voters**

that his positions differ from those of countless existing parties. There is nothing new under the sun, and he will not be able to prepare as carefully for his next speeches as he prepared for this one. More critically, the privilege of not answering questions from journalists or the audience will not last forever. He is running out of chances.

SUMMARY: Gantz steps well into the character of the savior-candidate. His confident step and sometimes embarrassed demeanor lend him the charm and grace of someone who is not a politician. This works well for a retired chief of staff who wants to take a few more seats in the polls, as was seen this week, but it is not enough for a prime minister. Gantz has not done enough to convince voters that his positions differ from those of countless existing parties. There is nothing new under the sun, and he will not be able to prepare as carefully for his next speeches as he prepared for this one. More critically, the privilege of not answering questions from journalists or the audience will not last forever. He is running out of chances.