Israel and the Middle East
News Update

Thursday, December 12

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Out of Time, Knesset Officially Dissolves

The Knesset was officially dissolved at midnight Wednesday as the deadline to form a new government passed, almost three months after Israel last went to the polls. Members of Knesset were to vote overnight on the agreed date for snap election, which was expected to take place on March 2, 2020. Earlier Wednesday, the Knesset passed the first reading of a bill to dissolve itself with the rest of the required readings set to be fast-tracked through parliament overnight. But time ran out and Israel was automatically launched into its third election cycle within 12 months. All that was left for MKs was to determine the date of Election Day. Israeli law states that should no government be formed within the allotted period after an election, parliament is dissolved and a fresh ballot will take place after 90 days. But that would clash with Purim holiday, forcing lawmakers to change the date. See also, “Israel to Hold Unprecedented Third Election in a Year After Knesset Dissolves” (Ha’aretz)

Gantz: Israel in 3rd Elections Because Netanyahu Wants Immunity

With just hours remaining until the Knesset likely calls Israel’s 3rd elections within a year, Blue and White party chief Benny Gantz on Wednesday said that the country was only facing another vote because Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is seeking immunity from prosecution. Gantz, speaking at a Knesset conference on “protecting the rule of law” held by Labor-Gesher MK Revital Swid, said, “It now seems that we will be going into a third election cycle today because of Netanyahu’s attempt to obtain immunity.” Addressing his own Yisrael Beytenu faction meeting, meanwhile, chairman Avigdor Liberman placed the blame on both Blue and White and the Likud party, saying, “The two major parties, which together have 65 seats, are responsible.” If no candidate receives the support of 61 MKs by midnight Wednesday, national elections will automatically be called. Due to various timing conflicts, the Knesset is voting throughout the day on a bill to set the date of the elections before the end of the currently mandated 90-day waiting period, on March 2. See also, “Israel Heads to Record Third Election, Extending Deadlock “ (New York Times)

Rivlin Complains of Anti-Israel Bias to United Nations Ambassadors

With his mind on the possibility of a last-ditch miracle to save Israel from a third round of parliamentary elections in less than a one-year period, President Reuven Rivlin on Wednesday hosted a delegation of close to thirty ambassadors accredited to the United Nations. Their visit was jointly organized by the American Zionist Movement comprising 33 national Jewish Zionist organizations, the International March of the Living and Israel’s permanent mission to the United Nations, which is headed by Danny Danon, who escorted the delegation. Prior to coming to Israel, the ambassadors, some of whom were accompanied by their spouses, first went to Poland where they visited the Warsaw Ghetto and the Majdanek extermination camp. They also toured the Polin Museum, where they learned something of the thousand years of Jewish life in Poland. This is the fourth such delegation to take the Poland-Israel tour. All in all, representatives of some 80 countries have participated. See also, “Rivlin Calls for Special U.N. Envoy on Antisemitism” (Hamodia)
I24 News

US Hopeful for Iran Prisoner Talks but Imposes New Sanctions

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Wednesday he hoped for further dialogue with Iran to free prisoners but announced new sanctions as he vowed no let-up in pressure. Iran has also voiced a willingness for more prisoner swaps after the exchange Saturday of Xiyue Wang, a US scholar detained since 2016, for Massoud Soleimani, an Iranian scientist detained in the United States since last year.

"I do hope that the exchange that took place will lead to a broader discussion on consular affairs. We still have Americans held in Iran -- too many, for sure," Pompeo told reporters, vowing to "follow every even tiny opening" to free the at least handful of Americans known to be in Iranian custody. See also "US hits Iran with new sanctions, but hopes for prisoner dialogue" (TOI)

Ynet News

Iran Says it Foiled 'Very Big' Foreign Cyber-Attack

Iran has foiled a major cyber-attack on its infrastructure that was launched by a foreign government, Iranian Information and Communications Technology Minister Mohammad-Javad Azari Jahromi said on Wednesday, two months after reports of a U.S. cyber operation against the country. U.S. officials told Reuters in October that the United States had carried out a secret cyber strike on Iran after the September 14 attacks on Saudi oil facilities, which Washington and Riyadh blamed on Tehran. Iran denied involvement in the attacks, which were claimed by Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthi movement.

"We recently faced a highly organized and state-sponsored attack on our e-government infrastructure which was... repelled by the country's security shield," Azari-Jahromi was quoted by the semi-official Mehr news agency as saying. "It was a very big attack," Azari-Jahromi said.

Times of Israel

At Hanukkah Party, Trump Signs Controversial Order on Anti-Semitism

Flanked by evangelical Christian leaders, Jewish members of his administration, and even a few House Democrats, US President Donald Trump signed an executive order Wednesday that would target alleged anti-Semitism — primarily in the form of Israel boycotts — on college campuses. At the annual White House Hanukkah Party, Trump put into place an order that will apparently require the US Department of Education to effectively interpret Judaism as a race or nationality, not just a religion. That will force the US government to withhold funding from colleges and universities if they fail to confront discrimination against Jewish students. See also “Trump’s anti-Semitism executive order, explained” (CNN)

Ha’aretz

Jersey City Shooter Posted Anti-Semitic Content Online, Report Says

At least one suspect involved in the shooting at a kosher supermarket in Jersey City on Tuesday afternoon had posted anti-Semitic content online, a law enforcement official familiar with the case told the New York Times. Jersey City Mayor Steve Fulop confirmed on Wednesday morning that the JC Kosher Supermarket, which was the scene of a shootout that killed six people, including one police officer and three bystanders, was the intended target of the gunmen. “After extensive review of our CCTV system it has now become clear from the cameras that these two individuals targeted the Kosher grocery,” he wrote on Twitter. Fulop added that although there are no indications of further threats, “due to an excess of caution the community may see additional police resources in the days/weeks ahead.” See also “Hundreds pack the streets to mourn 2 victims killed in Jersey City attack” (CNN)
There's Only One Man Responsible for Israel's Third, Redundant Election

By Yossi Verter, political commentator at Ha’aretz

- With silence, indifference and acceptance, the State of Israel finds itself today in its third election campaign in less than a year. The masses haven’t taken to the streets, roads haven’t been blocked, and no trash bin has been set alight. Five more months (at least) of continued paralysis, intensive harm to the economy and to the weaker populations in healthcare and welfare, and it’s as if we’re talking about a decree of fate. That’s just the way it is.

- The phrase, “There won’t be a third election” was repeated incessantly by politicians, not just during the past 85 days but even before the second, September election, which was also perceived as insane.

- But all the basic assumptions collapsed one after another. The rightwing bloc survived; there was no revolt in Likud; Avigdor Lieberman kept his word and didn’t join either side; Amir Peretz didn’t hasten to save Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu; Benny Gantz resisted the temptations, and what was supposed to be a political death blow to the prime minister – being charged with bribery – didn’t put off a single coalition member.

- This suicidal spiral that has gripped the political system in the past year stems from one person: Netanyahu. This election campaign, like the ones before it in April and September, is the result of his continuing to try to evade a trial that may very well land him in prison. So his motive is clear.

- What has long since crossed the lines of absurdity and logic is the obsequiousness of the other 54 members of Likud and its partner parties who continue to huddle around him and say yes to all his caprices.

- What hold does he have over them? What magical influence does he wield? In private conversations all of them, without exception, admit that this is already beyond the beginning of the end, deep into the twilight. But with eyes wide shut, as if they were moonstruck, they are following him into this unnecessary, expensive and contemptible adventure.

- Like most elections during the past decade, the March 2020 elections will be about “Bibi – Yes or No.” This time, even more than before, it will be even clearer that the game is between the two top guys, the only two candidates for prime minister. That’s why Yair Lapid stepped aside – he understood that he had no place on the field with the big boys, and that his presence would only do damage.

- Gantz is entering this campaign in the best position he could hope to be in: Kahol Lavan is beating Likud in the polls and he has drawn even with Netanyahu in polls about suitability to be prime minister, even though he has never spent a single day as any kind of minister. The one who has helped him get this far is his rival, with his inciting, divisive, aggressive behavior toward law enforcement. Gantz needn’t do anything except be himself: statesmanlike, believable, level-headed and even sympathetic.
Badges of Shame

By Ben Dror Yemini, commentator at Yedioth Ahronoth

- This day—the day on which all hope was lost, the day on which Israel’s political leadership was incapable of averting the disgrace—will go down in infamy. Israeli democracy has never looked so crippled. Our democratic resilience has remained strong, at least for the foreseeable future. The problem is the long term effects. It’s not that politics ever looked good. But now it looks worse than ever before. The next Knesset isn’t likely to be much different from the outgoing Knesset. Nothing will change. Ironically, however, this country, which needs the best of its citizens to go into politics, is only deterring them from doing so. After all, the disgrace of a third election within less than a year is a badge of shame for politics.

- The blame game isn’t over. But a clear statement can be made now. There is no need to obfuscate. There is no need to speak in politically correct terms. Out of the ten portions of blame, nine of them can be ascribed to Netanyahu. He clutched onto the law that permits him to continue to serve as prime minister. But with all due respect to the law, Israel is more important. There is no need for legal or judicial interference. The decision should have been based on what is best for the country. But Netanyahu preferred what was best for himself personally. All the flaws of the State Attorney’s Office, and they exist, will become white as the driven snow when contrasted with what he has done to politics and to the country.

- The coalition system in Israel grants sectarian parties huge power. In countries that are in the gray area of democracy, there is a problem in enforcing the will of the majority on minorities. In Israel the opposite is true. The sectarian parties have the power to enforce the will of the minority on the majority. This kind of capitulation to them was the lot of most of the coalitions that have been formed to date in Israel. But there’s a limit. And when the benefit of one man is on the scales—this is a capitulation that has reached a frightening peak. A unity government could have restored sanity to politics. But Netanyahu himself raised the flag of surrender. He did not want to conduct negotiations on behalf of a serious party like the Likud. He showed up with a dowry of a Litzman-Smotrich coalition. He wanted to impose all the ills of the outgoing government on the coalition agreements, on the government that would be formed. That is no way to form a unity government. That only serves to do away with any chance of unity. That only serves to undermine democracy and create a minority-oocracy.

- Israel is heading into a third election, which the majority of the public thinks is unnecessary. The majority is right. If voter turnout this time resembles voter turnout in the last election, no dramas can be expected. The blocs will remain approximately their same size. And even if the center-left bloc comes close to or receives 60 seats—it will still need a unity government. And what then? Will they take us again to elections? To a fourth round? The scope of voter turnout is an unknown, because politics can sometimes make people feel fed up and worn out. Voter turnout may prove to be lower this time, in which case the election result won’t accurately reflect the will of the people but, rather, will be a distortion that stems from disgust. These are bad days and yesterday was a particularly bad day. We can only hope that these are not the bad days, as the poet Natan Zach said, that precede the truly bad days.