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Israel and Middle East News Update

Tuesday, September 8

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News Excerpts

September 8, 2020

Jerusalem Post

PM, Opposition Trade Barbs as Red Cities Chaos Continues

As the [infection rate](#) continued to spike, and chaos reigned over the status of lockdowns in red cities, Prime Minister Netanyahu tried to evade responsibility for his government's failures, placing the blame on logistics and the Knesset opposition. Netanyahu tried to explain why the decision to place some 40 red cities under night curfews was pushed off. Netanyahu sent a letter to the heads of the opposition factions in the Knesset, accusing them of "harming Israel and encouraging anarchy." Liberman and Lapid responded with letters of their own that Netanyahu failed at dealing with the coronavirus crisis, with Lapid adding that he should resign. Liberman said that "we hear endless talk of closure, but what we need is order. [See also "Top Haredi Official Warns Relations with Netanyahu Could Be Beyond Repair" \(Ynet News\)](#)

I24 News

Gantz to Approve 5,000 New Houses in WB Settlements

Defense Minister and Alternate Prime Minister [Benny Gantz](#) is seeking to approve the construction of some 5,000 new housing units in West Bank settlements, Channel 12 reported. According to the report, which did not cite any sources, Gantz wants the Civil Administration panel approving construction plans to convene this week. To this end, he sent a letter to Prime Minister Netanyahu with a request to assemble the committee. The massive project could expand beyond the main settlement clusters and follow a half-year pause in settlement development. According to commentators, the maneuver is seen as an effort to build rapport with the settlement leaders, who were left disenfranchised by the lack of progress in Israel's plans to apply its sovereignty to West Bank areas. [See also "Gantz Approves Judea/Samaria Construction, Netanyahu Delays" \(Arutz Sheva\)](#)

I24 News

Poll: Bennett Surges as Right Bloc Gains 66 Knesset Seats

The right bloc consisting of Likud, Yamina, Shas and United Torah Judaism parties would gain 66 seats in the Knesset, a poll conducted by Channel 13 showed. The Likud, headed by Netanyahu, would come out with most mandates at 31. The second largest party would be Naftali Bennett's Yamina with 21 seats -- the biggest polled figure to date for the right-wing faction. Yesh Atid would follow with 18 mandates. The Joint List polled 13 seats and Blue & White slumped to 11. Ultra-Orthodox parties Shas and United Torah Judaism gained 7 mandates each, followed by Yisrael Beiteinu and Meretz, both with 6 mandates. Despite 65% of respondents saying they are not happy with Netanyahu's handling of the pandemic, 32% said he is the most fitting leader for premiership. [See also "Poll: Yamina Would Surge to 21 Seats, Majority Think Netanyahu Caved to Haredim" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

EU Warns Serbia Over Moving Its Embassy to Jerusalem

The EU voiced "serious concern and regret" over Belgrade's commitment to move its embassy to Jerusalem, casting a shadow over the resumption of Serbia-Kosovo talks, AFP reports. President Aleksandar Vucic of Serbia and Kosovo Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti met in Brussels for a second round of EU-brokered face-to-face talks to resolve disputes 2 decades after their war. The meeting followed a high-profile summit at the White House where Vucic and Hoti signed statements agreeing measures to improve economic relations and in Serbia's case pledging to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Kosovo has agreed to recognize Israel as part of the agreement. The EU said it is still committed to the "two state solution" and expects prospective members such as Serbia to align with its foreign policy positions. Chief PA negotiator Saeb Erekat [threatened](#) that the PA will sever ties with "any country that will move or open its embassy to Jerusalem". [See also "Israeli Ex-Envoys Blast Deals with Kosovo, Serbia" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Saudi King Links Normalization with Palestinian Statehood

King Salman of Saudi Arabia has informed US President Trump there would be no normalizations with Israel without Palestinian statehood, the kingdom's state news agency reported. King Salman reportedly told Trump he appreciated US efforts to support peace and that Saudi Arabia wanted to see a fair and permanent solution to the Palestinian issue based on the [Arab Peace Initiative](#). Under the proposal, Arab nations have offered Israel normalized ties in return for a statehood deal with the Palestinians and full Israeli withdrawal from territory seized in the 1967 Six-Day War. Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam and site of its holiest shrines, has no official diplomatic ties with Israel. The Persian Gulf power and the Jewish state are, however, believed to be maintaining behind-the-scenes ties as part of their mutual efforts to counter the threat posed by Iran's aspirations for regional hegemony. [See also "Saudi King Tells Trump That Kingdom Is Eager to Achieve Fair Solution to Palestinian Issue" \(Reuters\)](#)

UAE Planning First Official Visit to Israel on Sept. 22: Source

The UAE is planning to make its first official visit to Israel on Sept. 22 to build up the countries' agreement to normalize relations, a source familiar with the provisional itinerary said. Israeli officials declined to comment, and UAE officials did not respond to calls seeking comment. The UAE delegation's trip to Israel, which has yet to be finalized, would come in reciprocation of a groundbreaking trip to Abu Dhabi last week by senior Israeli and U.S. envoys. The source said the UAE was expected to finalize the trip after a date is announced for a ceremony, likely in Washington, where the countries' leaders will sign their [normalization accord](#). That ceremony is likely to take place in mid-September, the source added. The source declined to be identified by name or nationality due to the sensitivity of the evolving contacts. [See also "Israel Sees Trade with UAE at \\$4 Billion a Year" \(Reuters\)](#)

Court Rejects Bid to Delay Khan Al-Ahmar Hearing

The High Court of Justice chastised the state for its “embarrassing” delay in responding to a Regavim petition to force the evacuation of the illegal West Bank Bedouin herding village of Khan al-Ahmar, first filed in June of 2019. It set a new date of November 1, by when the state must explain to the court why it had failed to evacuate the temporary tents and huts that are home to some 180 members of the Jahalin tribe. The village is perched on the edge of Route 1, near the settlements of Ma’aleh Adumim and Kfar Adumim, just outside of Jerusalem. Earlier in the day, National Security Advisor Meir Ben-Shabbat had written on behalf of Prime Minister Netanyahu to explain that the state could not meet its deadline of September 8 to provide a written response to the court in advance of a September 30 hearing. The Jahalin Bedouin had initially lived in the Negev and were expelled in the 1950s by Israel to the West Bank, when it was under Jordanian rule. The Abu-Dahuk clan of Jahalin first moved to the site of the current Khan al-Ahmar village in the 1970s. [See also “Shin Bet: Hamas Recruited Israeli to Place Bomb at Bus Stop in Central Israel” \(Ynet News\)](#)

Al-Monitor

Army Operations in Sinai Continue Unabated

The Egyptian armed forces announced that seven officers and soldiers were killed and wounded in confrontations and raids launched by the army on terrorist hiding places in Sinai. The statement said the armed forces were successful in targeting and destroying 317 shelters and stores of explosives material in the northern Sinai Peninsula, in addition to destroying 19 four-wheel drive vehicles that were used by militants. The army also killed 77 militants and carried out several operations, killing two other individuals who were in possession of automatic rifles and explosive belts, in addition to confiscating quantities of ammunition of various calibers, explosives, a motorcycle and sums of money, according to the statement. The Egyptian army launched the comprehensive operation on Feb. 9, 2018, in Sinai, the Nile and Delta Valley and the Western desert, in a bid to eliminate any armed and terrorist groups in those areas.

A Crisis of Leadership

By Ben-Dror Yemini

- **It may not be the worst virus in history, but it is the most devious virus in history. How is it that in mass, densely crowded demonstrations, there is zero infection—at least according to the report that was submitted to Knesset Coronavirus Committee chairwoman MK Yifat Shasha- Biton, and that in Arab weddings, which are also held in the open air, or in Haredi yeshivas—infection is extensive? Some people might suspect for even a fleeting moment that maybe, just maybe, this isn't any ordinary virus but a genetically engineered virus. And that it isn't any old kind of engineered either but is politically engineered. Who knows? One of my transgressions has been to go not only to demonstrations that have been given an exemption from infection, but to the open-air markets as well. The crowding there, at least on Fridays, is sky high. The majority of the customers are careful to wear masks—though mainly on their chins. The stricter among them also cover their mouths. And the strictest of all—and they are not the majority—also deign to cover their noses. Are the open-air markets also entitled to an exemption, like Paris Square and Balfour Street? We have no idea. The only certainty is that this is a deceptive virus.**
- **This is not a debate between laypersons. Just a few days ago, important scientists issued a call to refrain from imposing a lockdown. Among the signatories was a Nobel Prize laureate, Prof. Michael Levitt, a biology professor, and Prof. Udi Qimron, a biologist from Tel Aviv University. The list includes people who know a thing or two about mathematical and economic models, such as the Prof. Amnon Shashua, Israel's leading high-tech man. "We call to adapt the Swedish model to the Israeli reality," they wrote, "while diverting the infection direction from the high-risk groups to the no-risk groups. Among other things, this means leaving schools open." These are not people whom we can make light of. They essentially are calling to adopt the model of mass infection for the purpose of attaining herd immunity.**
- **Before we could say Jack Robinson, another group of equally distinguished people issued the opposite call, against the first. "We know that we will have to wait years for herd immunity," they wrote. "Nobody knows how long it will take and putting people who are entirely healthy at risk of death will even further confuse the public." Among the signatories are Prof. Galia Rahav, the director of the Infectious Disease Unit at Sheba Hospital. We cannot make light of her. It isn't clear who is right, but there is no question that on one matter, the second group is right: the public is confused. How could it not be? After all, there is an ocean of information. The problem is not just conflicting petitions by experts, but also conflicting studies. What is revealed in Sunday's study by researchers from Toronto University will be utterly negated in Tuesday's study by Princeton University.**
- **So, what should we do? We might have expected Prof. Ronni Gamzu to convene the experts and the model builders with conflicting positions, together with operations research people and experts in economic models. They would then hold an intelligent**

discussion that was based on data. It may very well be the case that the Israeli economy is going to have to pay an economic price of a billion shekels a day, plus a million unemployed people, in order to extend by one-to-three years the life expectancy of the primary victims of the coronavirus, whose average age is over 80. But it may also very well be that we absolutely must avoid that huge cost and invest those billions of shekels in extending the life expectancy of many others. Which is better? We know for a certainty that more than 70% of the people who die of the coronavirus are aged 70 and over and that only 2% are under the age of 50. So maybe, just maybe, from a health aspect and from an economic aspect, it would be better to restrict a full lockdown only to those aged over 70, who are in the main group of victims? Perhaps doing that would also avert the huge economic cost, affect the health budget and also dramatically lowers mortality?

Keep Track of the Changes

By Ben Caspit

- The two of them were, each in turn, Netanyahu's closest advisers, confidants and admirers. Avigdor Liberman worked alongside Netanyahu in the beginning. After the victory in the [1996] election, Liberman was appointed director general of the Prime Minister's Office. Naftali Bennett came in the following decade and was Netanyahu's chief of staff in 2005-2006. Both gave interviews yesterday evening, without prior coordination with one another, on the two central television news programs. Liberman was interviewed by Hahadashot; Bennett was interviewed by Channel Thirteen News. Both of them presented their indictments of their former boss, leader and patron with unprecedented severity. I'll begin with a brief executive summary of the two men's statements.
- I'll begin with a brief executive summary of the two men's statements. Liberman said in his interview to Yonit Levy: "Today's Netanyahu is not the Netanyahu of 2003 (when Netanyahu was finance minister - B.C.). Too much time in power causes a person to lose their sense of reality. This government hasn't stopped confusing the public. Everything is haphazard and its decisions are patently illegal decisions. Every decision by the professional echelon gets censored by Deri and Litzman. The prime minister has been making decisions exclusively on the basis of his political considerations and is sacrificing public health. He's spreading the virus of chaos and anarchy."
- The cabinet hasn't been convened, there's no state budget, there's no budgets department director, there's no accountant general, there's no confidence in the government. The prime minister hides from the defense minister and the foreign minister an agreement with the Persian Gulf states. Decisions get made at the last moment: the budget, the schoolyear, red cities, yes to a lockdown, no to a lockdown. I have more faith in the citizens' common sense than in the petty nocturnal politics between the prime minister and the Haredim. The situation needs to be administered by the triangle of the IDF, the Home Front Command and local governments."
- Liberman further said: "Sometimes a leader has to stand up against patently illegal decisions. That is how the State of Israel was saved when Ariel Sharon made a decision and acted against a direct order and saved the country [during the Yom Kippur War]. Today there is chaos here. The government changes its decisions every evening, every moment, every day. It's impossible to keep track of the changes. If you check, [you'll see that] hundreds of decisions have been delayed, reversed or changed at the last moment. Currently, we need to deal only with the economy and the coronavirus. The fact that there isn't a budget and that they want to approve it seven days before the end of the year that's a joke, and we all know where that is leading us to." Bennett said in his interview to Tamar Ish-Shalom: "The letter that Netanyahu wrote today to the leaders of the opposition is sad and Netanyahu's performance this evening, at a time when so many citizens are in distress, was a combination of more spins and more palaver, such as that letter."

- **That isn't leadership. The prime minister is acting disgracefully. Get ahold of yourself, we have a country here that's at an historic low moment. We have the highest morbidity here in the world; Israel is the sickest country in the world. Show leadership. Paint [a picture] of what we need to do, how we're going to get out of this. This is a failed government, which has been making destructive zigzags. Netanyahu has failed. Netanyahu is leading the State of Israel to the greatest civilian, economic, social and health failure in the history of the country. He keeps putting petty politics ahead of caring for the citizens. The public wants a different leadership. The public wants management, [a government] that is attuned to what's happening on the ground and [a government] that will stop with the politics already."**
- **Bennett continued with his attack, saying: "The prime minister, with that letter and with his announcements, keeps on dividing everyone all the time. He accuses the Haredim, then the Arabs, and attacks them and then accuses the opposition. We're all in the same boat; it's called the State of Israel. What I expect from Netanyahu is that he gets a grip on things. That he stops engaging in politics day and night. Six months ago I presented to Netanyahu a plan that is identical to Gamzu's traffic light program and he brushed it aside maybe he was afraid that I would be successful, heaven forbid and it's unforgivable that he places his own politics before what is best for the citizens of Israel, and millions are suffering and are in anxiety because of him.**
- **What Netanyahu is now doing isn't leadership. Just like he knows how to stand [in front of the cameras] at 8:00 and to praise himself for the peace and whatever else he's delivered, [Netanyahu] now needs to come and say: 'I've failed. This is what needs to be done. This is the news, and it isn't good.' And not to continue to spread disgraceful spins." The troubling fact is that they are right. Israel is a country that hasn't had any management for a long time now. It runs itself. That has worked for the most part. Israel has foundations of excellence and it has creativity; Israel has admirable state mechanisms, some of which are the best of their kind in the world (the Air Force, the Mossad, the GSS, the security establishment, the high-tech sector, science, academia).**
- **The problem begins when an unanticipated crisis comes up that requires management. Not a speech, not a spin, not a trick and not a shtick. Management. Collecting and analyzing data; drafting plans; creating budgets, frameworks and backups; and execution. We have none of that. Or, more accurately, maybe we do, but not in the Netanyahu era. All we have is the leader, his interests, his whims, his politics, his household members, his criminal cases and mainly his ongoing efforts to shatter everything that stands in his way in his flight from justice. It's that simple.**
- **We spoke at such length about appointing a [coronavirus] "project manager," and the goal was simple: to give someone who has the requisite experience all the tools and means necessary to make the professional decisions. It took a time for that to happen a long time, many months. Then we realized that the project manager hadn't been given any powers. His traffic light program lay waiting for cabinet approval for a month. After it was approved, it crashed and burned. Every decision ends up taking days on end to pass, and it is immediately followed by the eruption of a protest and then everything**

grinds to a halt, a meeting is called in the middle of the night and a decision is made at the last second that is then reversed the following morning—and so on and so forth.

- **No one has yet devised a “keep track of the changes” program that is capable of keeping track of this mess. The Breslau hasids, the Haredim, the Arabs, the brides and grooms, the demonstrators each group and its own set of interests; each group and its own lobbyists; each group and its own band of fools and scorpions. The Haredim always end up winning in events of this sort. Maybe justly so. Israel has catapulted to first place in morbidity; it is on the verge of anarchy; the public doesn’t believe a single thing that a single one of its representatives, elected officials or administrators says and it’s every man for himself. Avigdor Liberman and Naftali Bennett are not the only former Netanyahu confidants who agree with the conclusions of this column. Dozens of former confidants, advisers, friends, aides and personal appointees have all come to the very same conclusion. If this weren’t about us, it might even be funny.**