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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

October 14, 2020

Ynet News

Ministers Decide to Extend Lockdown Through Sunday

PM Netanyahu and Defense Minister Benny Gantz agreed to extend lockdown until Sunday though changes could be made during the next cabinet meeting scheduled to take place on Thursday. Emergency regulations banning demonstrations and religious worship at a distance of no more than one kilometer from home, are set to expire at midnight. The coronavirus cabinet did not decide on reopening kindergartens and schools for first and second graders or small businesses. The Health Ministry announced that the rate of positivity for coronavirus testing had dropped to 4.9%, the lowest since early July. Health Minister Yuli Edelstein warned that a hasty exit would result in a third lockdown. "We will surely have to continue closures on red cities," Edelstein said. [See also "Coronavirus cabinet convenes but no decision on opening schools, businesses" \(Ynet News\)](#)

I24 News

Netanyahu Vowed to Gantz He Would Run for President

Netanyahu has vowed to run for the presidential office in the upcoming election, Channel 13 reported, citing Elad Mayor Yisrael Porush. In an interview, the official said that the pledge was made to Alternate Prime Minister Benny Gantz. Israel's president is elected by the Knesset for a term of 7 years, with the next vote set to take place in 2021. The office has a mostly symbolic role, handing the mandate to form a government in the wake of elections. The president also has the power to issue pardons. Under the terms at the foundation of the ruling coalition, Netanyahu is set to give up the prime minister's office in November 2021 to Gantz. In late June, Israeli media reported that Netanyahu was looking to avoid the rotation and keep the position at the helm of the government by offering the presidency to Gantz. The offer was reportedly based on Gantz's slump in the polls in the wake of his decision to join forces with Netanyahu.

I24 NEWS

Israel Will Maintain QME Over Mideast Neighbors

Rep. Brad Schneider (D-IL) said that bipartisan consensus in Washington will ensure Israel will maintain its qualitative military edge (QME) in the Middle East and insisted the Jewish state's security concerns are a top priority on Capitol Hill. The Jewish lawmaker shed more light on a new [bill](#) he introduced to Congress that seeks to enshrine US commitment to Israel's QME into law after numerous media outlets reported that the US is preparing to sell highly advanced F-35 jets to the UAE. Schneider noted that although the bill still has a few hurdles to overcome in the House and Senate, he was confident that the legislation could move forward given the longstanding position "of the US, the Trump administration, and the Congress" regarding Israel. [See also "Israel Must Retain Maintain a Qualitative Military Edge" \(Arutz Sheva\)](#)

China, Cuba, Pakistan Elected to UNHRC

The UN General Assembly elected China on the Human Rights Council, despite its treatment of Uigher Muslims, some one million of whom have been held in detention camps. It had the support of 139 out of the 191 nations who cast their vote. China was one of 16 nations that vied for 15 three-year seats on the 47-member council, which holds annual elections for its rotating membership. Cuba, Russia and Pakistan were also elected, but Saudi Arabia failed to secure a seat, receiving only 90 of the minimum 97 required votes. The U.S. and Israel have long complained about the UNHRC failure to tackle true human rights issues, charging that it has provided a haven for human rights abusers. In particular, both countries have accused the council of bias against Israel, particularly given that it approves more resolutions against the Jewish state than against any other nation during a given year. [See also "Erdan Slams UN Human Rights Council After Russia, China, Pakistan, Cuba Elected" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Palestinian Hunger-Striker 'Close to Death,' Group Says

A Palestinian man on hunger strike for nearly 80 days since his arrest in July is "on the verge of death", Israeli rights group B'Tselem said. Maher al-Akhras, 49, was arrested near Nablus and placed in administrative detention, a policy that Israel uses to hold suspected terrorists without charge. The married father of six launched his strike to protest the policy. He has been arrested several times previously for having ties to the Islamic Jihad terrorist group. At the Ofer Prison in the West Bank, 32 Palestinian prisoners have begun a hunger strike in solidarity with al-Akhras. The 32 security prisoners were "punished immediately," Israel Prison Service said. "They were transferred into isolation and placed in empty cells without any equipment," the official prison body added. Palestinian PM Mohammad Shtayyeh demanded Akhras' "immediate release," according to a statement on WAFA. [See also "Spearfishing in Gaza, a Living Improvised Under the Sea" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Jordan Deports Sbarro Bomber's Husband to Qatar

Jordanian authorities expelled a convicted Palestinian terrorist to Qatar earlier this month, sparking backlash in Jordan in support of Nizar Tamimi and his wife. Tamimi's wife, Ahlam, who is wanted by the U.S. for her central role in a 2001 bombing in Jerusalem that killed 15 Israelis, remains in Jordan. The Palestinian Prisoners' Affairs Commission announced Nizar Tamimi's expulsion on October 1, saying that Jordanian authorities had refused to renew his residency and that he had left for Qatar. Tamimi was convicted of terrorism by an Israeli military court in 1993 after murdering Chaim Mizrahi, a student from the [West Bank](#) settlement of Beit El. Mizrahi was ambushed as he went to buy eggs, as he did each week, from a Palestinian farmer in Ramallah. Nizar and a relative, Said Tamimi, stabbed Mizrahi to death, stuffed his body into the trunk of his car, and set the vehicle alight. Qatar has played host to several radical Islamist groups in the past; former Hamas terror chief Khaled Mashal has resided in Doha since 2012.

IDF Carries Out Covert Operation, Destroy 2 Syrian Outposts

IDF Special Forces crossed the border into the demilitarized zone between Israel and Syria and destroyed two outposts belonging to the Syrian army, N12 reported. The operation was carried out following Syria's continued violation of the disengagement agreement between Israel and Syria from 1974, which determines that a designated buffer zone between the borders would only be occupied by a special UN force called the Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF.) Recently, however, the Syrian military returned to the buffer zone in the Golan Heights and spread its forces across the border, leading the IDF to take action and launch the unusual operation. The operation included combat soldiers from the Nachal Brigade and commando soldiers from Yahalom - a special unit that specializes in combat engineering - crossing the border and destroying two Syrian outposts without being detected. A team commander from Yahalom described the operation and said it included "making our way in a silent and covert manner to the targets, placing a system of explosives on both outposts and blowing them up simultaneously." The IDF has been focused in recent years on preventing Hezbollah and Iran from establishing terrorist positions on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights, including launching attacks from the air against their positions. [See also "Hezbollah, Amal Criticize Lebanon Team Over Israel Border Talks" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Azerbaijan Accuses Armenia of Trying to Attack Pipelines

Azerbaijan accused Armenia of trying to attack its gas and oil pipelines and warned of a "severe" response, as tensions mounted over a fraying ceasefire in the mountain enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia has denied targeting Azeri pipelines, which supply world markets with oil and gas, but concern is growing over the failure of a 4-day-old ceasefire to end the worst fighting in decades over the tiny territory in the South Caucasus. More than 500 people have been killed since the fighting broke out on Sept. 27 in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, which is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan but is governed and populated by ethnic Armenians. The violence has raised fears that big regional powers Turkey and Russia could be sucked into the conflict. "Armenia is trying to attack and take control of our pipelines," Azeri President said in an interview with Turkish broadcaster Haberturk. Azerbaijan's defense ministry said separately that it would destroy all military facilities in Armenia that targeted Azeri civilian locations. The Armenian defense ministry has denied firing on civilian targets, but said it reserved the right to target any military installations and combat movements in Azerbaijan. Armenian Prime Minister was due to address the nation on Wednesday.

State Attorney in Limbo

By Tova Tzimuki

- Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is known for his ability to see a few steps ahead. That isn't always good enough to let him solve his problems. We'll know in the next few days whether he successfully kept the search committee for selecting the next state attorney from being formed, after Justice Minister Avi Nissenkorn announced ten days ago that it would be. Justice Minister Avi Nissenkorn, who has had more than his share of fights within the Netanyahu government about the need to uphold the rule of law, decided to form a search committee in order to set in motion the process to select the next state attorney. He realized it was going to be impossible to come to an amicable decision jointly with all the coalition partners, as stipulated by the coalition agreement. He merely wanted to force the natural process in which the state attorney was selected properly and appropriately, just as in the past.
- But Netanyahu views the appointment of the next state attorney to be his be all and end all. In his dreams, the next state attorney will reopen his cases, "review" them, rebel against Mandelblit's authority, and possibly even compel him to resign. In the best-case scenario [with that kind of state attorney], he'll have a French bill passed to prevent his continued prosecution. In the worst-case scenario, he'll sign the plea bargain agreement of his dreams.
- That was why Netanyahu refused to allow Nissenkorn's nominee for Justice Ministry director general, Shimi Baron, from being confirmed by the cabinet. The Justice Ministry director general is one of the five members of the search committee for the state attorney. That's where the seeds of what happened yesterday were planted. Now, ten days after Nissenkorn and the search committee's chairman, Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, finished forming the committee, which includes acting director general Sigal Yakobi, Civil Service Commissioner Prof. Daniel Hershkowitz said that there was a problem.
- The commissioner naturally hadn't said a word during the last two months in the absence of a permanent director general. When Mandelblit drafted Netanyahu's conflict of interest agreement, which the prime minister has yet to sign, he emphasized that Netanyahu was not to be involved in appointments related to the law enforcement establishment, "either directly or indirectly." It's hard to believe that even he believes has faith in that document. Anyone who has followed the holdup of that appointment knew that something was being cooked up in the Civil Service Commission. After all, all they had to do was issue the tender.
- Now the truth is out. The commissioner, a Netanyahu appointee of course, is splitting hairs. Until the cabinet confirms Baron, the search committee cannot be formed. Now letters will fly from the Civil Service Commission to the minister, and maybe from there to the High Court of Justice. They won't be selecting the state attorney. Mandelblit said several times recently that the possibility of Netanyahu being declared incapacitated is

not off the agenda. One of the grounds for declaring someone incapacitated, for example, is a criminal defendant attempting to influence the handling of his cases. That is what happened in the Baron affair in 1997, when then- prime minister, Netanyahu, was suspected of having helped actions that were intended to obstruct the trial of Aryeh Deri by means of appointing an attorney general who would benefit him. The case was closed, but the lesson wasn't learned.

Elections Now

By Haim Ramon

- **Imagine the following: one day, there is a wave of traffic accidents in Chelmland [Chelm is the town of fools in Jewish lore]. Dozens are killed and hundreds are injured. Nobody understands what is going on. The government responds by banning all driving. The damage to the state and to society is enormous. The panicked public complies and the number of accidents drops to zero. The prime minister of Chelmland faces the cameras and announces festively: “We have defeated the plague of accidents, drive safely, the keys are in the ignition.” Within a short amount of time, the traffic accidents resume. Meanwhile, it becomes evident that all the drivers who are involved in the accidents are 24 years old or less and drivers who suffer from extreme shortsightedness.**
- **Everyone realizes that if the government were to forbid the drivers who cause the accidents from driving—the problem would be solved. Not in Chelmland. Once again, the leader forbids all the country’s citizens from driving. Israel is Chelmland. The above reflects the government’s decision-making process under Netanyahu. His decisions are illogical, they zigzag, they stem from political rather than epidemiological considerations and they have brought disaster raining down on us: on our health, on the economy, on society and on education. Netanyahu made use of a false, deceptive and dubious database, with the result being: a huge collapse in the public’s confidence in its government, unlike anything since the Yom Kippur War. Millions of Israelis—the victims of Netanyahu’s panic and his managerial failures—are paying and will yet pay for a long time to come, the financial and health price of Netanyahu’s failed policy. He promised mountains but did very little.**
- **The coronavirus is no longer an unfamiliar phenomenon. We’ve learned quite a bit about its features. It has virtually no impact on young people. The data show that almost all the relative extra mortality relative to the same period last year (about 940 people) is restricted to people who are 70 and older, whereas a slight drop in the mortality rate was recorded among people under the age of 70. That appears to also be the age breakdown among the seriously ill. The conclusion is horrifying: the government has forsaken our grandmothers and grandfathers to death and disease. That is why more than 600 Israeli doctors joined the opinion of 11,000 doctors and scientists from all over the world and recently signed a petition that demands that resources and efforts be devoted only to protecting the elderly and other vulnerable members of society. In other words, better to impose a lockdown on the high-risk groups than a ruinous lockdown on the entire general population. Classes should be allowed in all schools. The mortal blow to the future of millions of children, particularly those from the weaker sectors of society, must end. All businesses and workplaces and cultural venues should be allowed to operate while strictly complying with the purple certificate criteria, and all assemblies in indoor venues should be banned.**
- **But Netanyahu has prevented any serious debate from being held on the alternative to his policy decisions, an alternative that has been proposed by a large number of people**

within the medical and scientific community. Many countries imposed a lockdown in the first wave of the coronavirus. All of them, except for Israel, learned the bitter lesson from those lockdowns: a total lockdown is total stupidity. That is why, when the second wave hit, not a single leader chose to imprison their citizens in another lockdown and to prevent residents from going overseas. And even though he opted for the extreme solution, Netanyahu's failure was the biggest, aside from that of the United States. The bottom line is chilling: the coronavirus is less damaging than the measures that Netanyahu has used against it.

- **In light of his immense failure, Netanyahu has to go, just as the people responsible for the Yom Kippur War fiasco, Golda and Dayan, resigned. That said, the public debate must be over the results of his policy, and not over his personality. People who do not believe in their power to defeat him at the polling stations are trying to oust him by means of law enforcement and by means of demonstrations that now, amid this terrible coronavirus fiasco, have remained focused on corruption. That attitude is ludicrous and is undemocratic, just as is the approach being taken by people clinging to their seats on the argument that holding early elections will be damaging to the fight against the coronavirus.**
- **The opposite is true: Israel needs elections in order to put an end to Netanyahu's coronavirus failure. These elections will be about the way Israel ought to fight the virus. The other issues—the conflict with the Palestinians, reforming the law enforcement system—will have to wait. The cost of early elections is less than the cost of a single week of lockdown, it is marginal compared to the gain of halting the collapse that he has precipitated. In these elections, every party that seeks the public's confidence will have to present its alternative on how to fight the coronavirus and how to rehabilitate Israel. The elections must be held quickly because with every day passing day the disaster is only growing worse.**