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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

October 19, 2020

Jerusalem Post

Gantz Threatens to Pass Bill That Would End Bibi's Career

Blue & White raised its threat against Prime Minister Netanyahu, warning that if he does not enable the passage of the 2021 state budget by the end of the year, it would propose the so-called **anti-Bibi bill**. The bill would prevent anyone charged with serious crimes from forming a government, including Netanyahu, who is on trial for fraud, bribery and breach of trust. The bill was first presented in August but was defeated, as it did not have Blue & White's support. But if Blue & White now votes for the bill, it could gain a majority of 61 MKs that would include Blue & White, Yesh Atid, the Joint List, Yisrael Beytenu, Meretz and Labor. A minority of 59 MKs from Likud, Shas, United Torah Judaism, Yamina, Geshet and Bayit Yehudi would oppose it. [See also "Poll: Israelis Believe Politics Leading Virus Decisions, Pan PM's Performance" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Israel and Bahrain Sign Joint Declaration

An Israeli delegation led by National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat flew to Bahrain where they signed a joint communique on establishing diplomatic relations with the Bahrain. The Israeli delegation was joined by a U.S. delegation led by Treasury Secretary Mnuchin. During this brief visit, the delegations aim to advance diplomatic ties, in furtherance of the joint statement of intent on the matter signed by Netanyahu and Bahraini Foreign Minister at the White House in September. Following a welcoming ceremony, delegation members divided into working groups with the aim of signing a second, more detailed, declaration on establishing diplomatic relations and peace. It is not anticipated that the declaration to be signed will be a full-blown peace agreement like the one Israel signed with the UAE, in part due to fierce opposition in Bahrain to the normalization of relations with Israel. [See also "Today We Are One Family, the Family of the Sons of Abraham" \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

Ynet News

Erekat Taken to Israeli Hospital for Coronavirus

Chief Palestinian negotiator [Saeb Erekat](#) was taken by ambulance to a hospital in Israel for treatment of a worsening case of COVID-19, the PLO said. Witnesses said Erekat, 65, was on a stretcher when he was placed inside an Israeli ambulance outside his home in Jericho, in the West Bank. Erekat, who is also secretary-general of the PLO, disclosed on Oct. 8 that he had contracted coronavirus. There is heightened concern over Erekat's vulnerability to the illness because he underwent a lung transplant in the U.S. in 2017. He was rushed to Jerusalem's Hadassah Medical Center. Erekat has been one of the most high-profile faces of the Palestinian leadership for decades, especially to international audiences. Erekat is also one of the most senior advisers to President Abbas.

Abbas Warns Jerusalem Arabs Against UAE Funding

The PA President Abbas stepped up its attacks on the UAE and accused it of stabbing the Palestinians in the heart with a dagger. Fatah also warned residents of east Jerusalem of the “Emirati money dipped in Palestinian blood,” an apparent reference to claims that the UAE is planning to fund various projects and individuals in the city in cooperation with the Jerusalem Municipality. The PA leadership has in recently urged Palestinians to refrain from insulting symbols and persons of the Gulf states. The move came as part of the PA’s effort to ease tensions with the UAE and Bahrain. Secretary-General of Fatah in Jerusalem said that the purported UAE funding comes while Israeli authorities ban the PA from operating in the city. He warned Palestinians not to cooperate with such projects, whether directly or indirectly. An Israeli law passed in 1995 bans the PA from engaging in political, diplomatic, security or security-related activities within the area of Israel, including east Jerusalem. [See also “Jerusalem Deputy Mayor, UAE Businessman Discuss Economic Ties” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

ISIS Excoriates Agreements Between Israel & Gulf Countries

The jihadist Islamic State (ISIS) group blasted agreements to normalize relations between Israel and the Gulf countries and called for attacks in Saudi Arabia. In an audio recording broadcast on the organization's Telegram channel and attributed to its spokesperson, ISIS believes that the UAE and Bahrain have betrayed Islam by normalizing. The two countries are close allies of Saudi Arabia, a leader of the Gulf monarchies which has not normalized its ties with Israel but is engaged in what experts call soft or alternative normalization. The spokesperson urged the group's fighters and Muslims to carry out attacks in the Saudi kingdom. After controlling territory straddling Iraq and Syria, ISIS lost its last major Syrian stronghold in 2019, after being completely crushed in Iraq. Its former leader, Al-Baghdadi, was killed in 2019. With their self-proclaimed "caliphate" defeated in 2014, many ISIS jihadists hide in a vast desert area near the Iraqi-Syrian border, from where they prepare and carry out regular attacks.

Iran Says UN Arms Embargo on Tehran Has Ended

A UN embargo on arms sales to and from Iran [expired](#) in line with a 2015 landmark nuclear deal, the Iranian foreign ministry said. President Trump withdrew the U.S. from the deal in 2018 and has unilaterally begun reimposing sanctions on Iran. But Washington suffered a setback when it failed to win support from the UN Security Council to indefinitely extend the arms embargo. Despite pulling out of the deal, the Trump administration insists it is still a “participant” and can therefore go ahead with reimposing sanctions. But the US legal argument has been rejected by almost the entire UN Security Council, with European allies of the U.S. saying the priority is to salvage a peaceful solution to Iran’s nuclear program. Washington maintained it will seek to prevent Iran from purchasing Chinese tanks and Russian air defense systems. [See also “As China-Iran Talks Continue, Beijing Keeps up Outreach to Gulf” \(AI-Monitor\)](#)

Reuters

U.S. Official Went to Syria Seeking Americans' Release

A White House official traveled to Damascus earlier this year for secret meetings with the Syrian government seeking the release of at least two U.S. citizens thought to be held there, a Trump administration official said. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, named the official as Kash Patel, a deputy assistant to President Trump and the top White House counterterrorism official, saying he had flown to Damascus. “It is emblematic of how President Trump has made it a major priority to bring Americans home who have been detained overseas,” said the official, who was confirming a report in the Wall Street Journal. The White House and the State Department did not immediately respond to requests for comment. [See also “White House Official Held Secret Talks in Syria to Free Us Citizens” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Nagorno-Karabakh Ceasefire Jeopardized by Shelling

A new ceasefire in the mountain enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh appeared to be in jeopardy, with ethnic Armenian forces and Azerbaijan accusing each other of renewed shelling. The ceasefire was agreed on Saturday after a deal brokered by Russia a week earlier failed to halt the worst fighting in the South Caucasus since the 1990s. More than 1,000 people have been killed since fighting began on Sept. 27. The failure to halt the fighting has raised fears of a humanitarian crisis and put new strains on ties between [Turkey](#), which strongly backs Azerbaijan, and its allies in NATO, which want the fighting to stop. Russia, which has a defense pact with Armenia, could also be at risk of being sucked into a regional war. Officials in Nagorno-Karabakh said Azeri forces were shelling their positions in northern and southern areas of the line of contact that divides them. The Azeri defense ministry said Armenian forces had shelled its positions in the Garanboy, Terter and Aghdam regions of Azerbaijan overnight and the Agjebedin region was being shelled on Monday morning. The reports could not immediately be verified.

Red on the Rise

By Nahum Barnea

- **“Capitulation” read Yedioth Ahronoth’s banner front-page headline yesterday. That headline aptly conveyed the sense of insult that gripped multitudes of Israelis upon seeing their government’s capitulation to the Haredi rabbis. With this latest zigzag by the government, the red Haredi cities can act as if they were green. Schools are to remain shut across all of Israel, but they’ll be open in the red cities. The traffic light has been reversed: green means stop; red means go. Thus spake Rabbi Kanievsky. I share the sense of anger, but disagree with the conclusion that some people have drawn.**
- **Netanyahu’s capitulation needs to be judged based on the alternatives that he had. Let’s assume that he were to have decided to enforce a full and hermetic lockdown on the red cities. Battalions of patrolmen would have been dispatched to raid the courtyards of Bnei Brak and the alleyways of Mea Shearim; they would have dragged out men in prayer shawls who were hiding in the holy ark; they would have handcuffed rabbis; they would have had to try to dodge the feces-filled diapers that would have been hurled at them from the balconies above; they would have been immortalized in video footage that caught them as they chased down ten-year-old urchins. That can’t work. Not that way, and not in the Jewish state.**
- **A form of civil disobedience has been developing in the Haredi cities in the past several months. Anyone proposing quelling civil disobedience by means of brute force should shut his eyes and consider which methods he would propose be used against civil disobedience if it were being perpetrated by him or his children. You can’t cry out against police brutality at the demonstrations on Balfour Street and urge police brutality on the streets of Mea Shearim. The police need to know the limits of its own strength. The prime minister needs to know the limits of his strength as well: in a properly-run country that’s called democracy. Okay, you’ll say, we get it. What is your solution? You certainly don’t want to see us dragged into a third lockdown and the tremendous damage that that will do to the Israeli economy just because a 92-year-old rabbi has decided to thumb his nose at the Health Ministry’s guidelines. I don’t have an implementable solution to offer, but I do have a draft copy of a speech that the prime minister could give, a speech that he hasn’t yet given.**
- **“In light of the dropping morbidity rate,” he could say, “we have decided to emerge from the second lockdown. This time we won’t repeat the mistakes that we made when we emerged from the first lockdown, mistakes that I take responsibility for. “I want now to address the residents of the Haredi cities. I love you and am devoted to you. I admire your rabbis. If only we, the Israeli government, were to invest as much as they do in education; if only we were prepared to fight for that the way they are. “I respect your mayors; they are serious and responsible people. They know their populace. Their administrative capabilities are just as good as the Health Ministry and the Home Front Command’s capabilities. They need to be allowed to decide and to implement. “As such, I have decided that the government will lift all restrictions on the red cities and**

neighborhoods. Anyone who wants to assemble will assemble; anyone who wants to hold a mass wedding can do so; anyone who wants to open the synagogues, the yeshivas, the ritual baths and the elementary schools can do so, without face masks and without pods.

- **“We won’t force people to wear masks, to maintain personal hygiene and social distancing. We don’t believe in coercion. The police won’t be sent in under any circumstances. We will only come in to help—to move people who are in serious condition to the hospital, to supply food and medicine and to conduct testing. “Having said that, we are going to have to take a few measures to protect the public. A partial closure will be imposed on Ramat Gan, Givat Shmuel and Tel Aviv—the cities that border on Bnei Brak. Residents of those cities will not be allowed to enter Bnei Brak, and the residents of Bnei Brak will not be allowed to enter them. Petah Tikva will be cut off from the neighboring Elad; Modiin will be cut off from Modiin Illit. The dream of a Haredi autonomy will at long last come true, to the rabbis’ joy. You won’t have to do anything for the state except, of course, to vote in the elections. “At first you’ll be very happy: the yeshiva students will dance all night long; you’ll describe our decision as a pre-Hanukkah miracle, as Haredi Independence Day.**
- **“Then things will begin to change. There will be fewer violations in the red cities; with independence comes responsibility. Your rabbis will warn you to look after your own health; municipal supervisors will be sent to weddings to break up large assemblies in response to popular pressure. “The end will be good for everyone. The Haredim will realize that they want the secular state and what it has to offer; the secular will realize that the separation isn’t good for them and that Israel is too small and too densely populated for separation. There isn’t enough room for an autonomy. The separation will be brief. God willing, it will engender love.” There ends the draft speech. I borrowed the idea from an old Russian story about two drivers who collided in Red Square. A moment before they began to curse one another, one of them remembered that it was courtesy on the roads week. “Do you know what,” he said to the other driver. “I’ll go to hell.”**

Persecuted in Our Own Country

By Shoshana Chen

- **The schools and yeshivas in the Haredi sector that reopened illustrate the battle that is being waged over two decisive issues: the centrality of Torah studies and instilling Torah in the coming generations; and the power wielded by Israel's greatest sages. Both of those issues, said self-styled experts on Haredi society, had grown weaker during the coronavirus crisis. But a government that plans and thinks ahead, a government that accepts all of its citizens and is not out-of-touch with them and does not coerce them, would never have reached this point, this clash. The problem could have been dealt with beforehand. The State of Israel, rich in project managers and ministers, has only deepened the rift [with the Haredim] through its lack of governance and its ignorance. Instead of creating solutions, it created new problems.**
- **The state created a situation in which every Haredi feels persecuted. Very soon the Haredi individual will be scared to walk the street in his country, regardless of whether he sent his children to yeshiva this week or whether he is one of the many unemployed Israelis who has stayed home with his many children in a crowded apartment because the schools have not been reopened. In the democratic Jewish state, it's enough to have a beard, a kippa and a wig to be given the mark of Cain. Instead of the coronavirus uniting us, the term two states for two peoples has taken on new meaning, one that is unrelated to the Palestinians.**
- **That has happened at weddings, funerals, tishes. The current crisis came about because the secular don't understand that for many people, Torah study is the answer. The more we study, the sooner the pandemic will be over. One needn't agree with that view, but the fact cannot be ignored that it isn't a Haredi invention. For thousands of years, throughout Jewish history, people believed that a failure to study the Torah led to a loss of the soul and a betrayal of life's essence—which is something much worse than either COVID-19 or death.**
- **They carried that faith with them even when death was part of their daily experience, and there was no lack of moments of that kind. King David wrote: "Unless Thy law had been my delight, I should then have perished in mine affliction." [Psalms 119:92] I come from a family whose sons studied Torah in the Warsaw ghetto, risking their lives. The offspring of the Jews of Yemen who studied Torah from one book in a room full of students live in this country, as do the offspring of the Mashad Jewry and the Soviet Union who studied Torah at the risk of their lives. We begin our day with the prayer "May the Lord place the words of your Torah in our mouths and in the mouths of the people of Israel," but we were not diligent enough to explain the sweet taste of Torah to people outside the Haredi camp.**
- **The Haredi worldview regards the Torah as the ultimate book of instructions. Without Torah study, the world does not exist. The Haredim and the yeshivas are a melting pot. And the study groups, the passion, the shouts characteristic of studying in a large hall,**

the diligence that is no less important than intellectual achievements. It's hard to explain this, particularly to a society that is becoming more and more eaten up with prejudice, superficiality and stereotypical judgment.

- There are disagreements within Haredi society over how it would be best to safeguard life during the pandemic. Rabbi Asher Weiss, a prominent arbiter, along with quite a few principals of Litvak yeshivas as well as Hasidic rabbis have adopted an emphatic position against reopening schools and yeshivas. Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky thinks otherwise. Incidentally, he also issued instructions that the schools that did reopen would have to be strictly in compliance with safety rules.
- Disagreements are not something that were invented today, disagreement goes to the heart of the Talmud. Neither the coronavirus project manager, the health minister nor the prime minister have the tools to decide what qualifies as a life or death situation. Such a decision entails risk management, heeding the advice of experts. Anyone who thinks that Rabbi Kanievsky is not aware of the views of experts on the matter of the coronavirus, doesn't know what they're talking about. In his view, stopping Torah study in the schools for boys adds another risk to the pandemic, rather than decreasing the risk. Just as doctors and scientists all over the world believe that the emotional and financial damage of the lockdown is greater than the health risk.
- I cannot but be amazed by the courage displayed by the 92 year-old Jew. He practices what he preaches. He has not stopped studying Torah for a single day since he has learned to read, including during the days of the coronavirus. He has no fear of the prime minister or of political pressure. From the heights of his great age, facing the extended family that he raised, what matters to him is Torah study for children from age of five, for lads and young men, the majority of whom are complete strangers to him. Even the COVID-19 that he contracted did not change his life.
- I have no doubt that Rabbi Kanievsky is genuinely concerned for every Jew, in Israel and in the world, much more than are the cabinet members and the MKs are. Despite his power, he is not a proud man. One need only look at how he lives. How many people in Israel are willing to appreciate this? What price will we pay as a society because of our inability to appreciate the other? How much will we pay, as individuals, in encounters between secular and Haredim at work, in hospitals, in stores and on the street? How long will all the Haredim be lumped together in one ostracized package by well-poisoners and incitement?