



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and Middle East News Update

Tuesday, October 20

Headlines:

- **Opposition MKs Assail Netanyahu's Handling of Pandemic**
- **IDF III-Prepared to Counter Chemical Warfare**
- **Hadassah Consulting with US on Treatment for Erekat**
- **IMF: Nearly All ME Economies Hit by Pandemic Recession**
- **Trump: U.S. to Remove Sudan From Terrorism List**
- **Iran Arms Embargo Ends with Warnings From Washington**
- **Netanyahu Meets 1st UAE Delegation for Historic Signing**
- **Turkey Withdraws From Base in Northwest Syria**

Commentary:

- **Yedioth Ahronoth: "Gantz Goes All-In"**
 - By Yuval Karni
- **Yedioth Ahronoth: "The Majority Needs a Rebellion"**
 - By Ben-Dror Yemini

News Excerpts

October 20, 2020

Times of Israel

Opposition MKs Assail Netanyahu's Handling of Pandemic

Knesset members assailed Prime Minister Netanyahu for his handling of the coronavirus pandemic, as Israel began exiting a weeks-long national lockdown that was imposed to contain one of the highest infection rates in the world. Netanyahu was required to attend the Knesset plenum session on "the shameful failure of the prime minister in managing the economic and health crisis," after 40 MKs signed a letter forcing him to appear. Speaking from the rostrum, Netanyahu accused opposition lawmakers of hampering the government's efforts to combat the virus. Netanyahu defended his decision making during the pandemic and the imposition of a second national lockdown, noting the marked drop in new infections. [See also "Netanyahu Takes Shot at Bennett as Yamina Surges in Polls" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ynet News

IDF III-Prepared to Counter Chemical Warfare

According to State Comptroller Matanyahu Englman, the IDF's combat units were not adequately trained to deal with chemical or biological weapons despite clear procedures being established on the issue in 2014. An inside IDF report concluded that Israel must update its knowledge and understanding of chemical and biological threats and subsequently formulate a plan to respond to such threats. Then-chief of staff, Benny Gantz, approved the report's findings and instructed their immediate implementation. According to Englman's most recent report, the IDF has failed to fully implement the recommendations 6 years later. Additionally, the comptroller has found gaps in the level of readiness and training of the IDF's land forces - both regular and reserves - in dealing with chemical and biological threats. The comptroller further noted that the IDF's Brigade 76 - which is tasked with handling the use of chemical weapons against IDF ground forces in times of war - has not been trained in accordance with the guidelines.

Jerusalem Post

Hadassah Consulting with US on Treatment for Erekat

Veteran PLO official Saeb Erekat was intubated after his condition worsened, and he is now considered in critical condition in Hadassah-University Medical Center. The hospital issued a statement reporting that Erekat was "ventilated on high concentration of oxygen and on nitric oxide gas and is in the prone position. He has received concentrated convalescent plasma with high levels of anti-COVID antibodies." "We have consulted with specialists from Tel Aviv, New York and Washington," a spokesman said, adding: "Prognosis remains very guarded." According to the hospital, Erekat is in the intensive care unit for corona patients and required high-flow oxygen therapy (HFOT) and oxygen (Airbo). Another senior PLO official, Hanan Ashrawi, was diagnosed with the coronavirus earlier this month.

IMF: Nearly All ME Economies Hit by Pandemic Recession

The pandemic has pushed nearly all Mideast nations into the throes of an economic recession this year, according to a report published by the International Monetary Fund. This comes as the IMF estimates that the global economy will shrink 4.4% this year, marking the worst annual plunge since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Several countries had been struggling with issues ranging from lower oil prices and sluggish economic growth to corruption and high unemployment. IMF estimated Israel's GDP was expected to shrink by 5.9% compared to an average of 5.8% in other developed economies, adding that it expected Israel's recession to be greater than in developing markets excluding China. The international lender is calling on countries to focus their immediate priorities on ensuring adequate resources for health care and correctly targeting support programs to the most-vulnerable people. [See also "Oil Dips After OPEC+ Meeting as Libyan Supply Boost Weighs"](#)

Trump: U.S. to Remove Sudan From Terrorism List

President Trump announced the U.S. would remove Sudan from its list of state sponsors of terrorism as soon as Khartoum sets aside the \$335m it has agreed to pay to American victims of militant attacks and their families. The deal could also set in motion steps by Sudan toward establishing diplomatic relations with Israel, according to a U.S. official. U.S.-Sudanese negotiations have focused on funds that Washington wants Khartoum to deposit in escrow to be paid for victims of al Qaeda attacks on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, U.S. gov't sources said. A Sudanese gov't source said Khartoum was ready to pay compensation to American victims. While Trump can act on his own to remove Sudan from the list, [congressional legislation](#) is needed to ensure the flow of payments to embassy bombing victims and their families - and immediate action on Capitol Hill is far from certain. [See also "Sudan's PM Thanks Trump: This Will Help Us Get Debt Relief" \(Arutz Sheva\)](#)

Iran Arms Embargo Ends with Warnings From Washington

An arms embargo on Iran has expired after 13 years despite a push by the US to keep Tehran as a pariah in the international weapons trade. The embargo's termination came in line with provisions under the 2015 nuclear deal signed by Iran, the US, China, France, Germany, Russia and the UK in 2015., despite efforts in the UN Security council to renew the embargo. Secretary of State Pompeo warned that Washington was ready to unilaterally "sanction any individual or entity that materially contributes to the supply, sale or transfer of conventional arms to or from Iran, as well as those who provide technical training, financial support and services and other assistance related to these arms." Pompeo added that "any country" that attempts to sell weapons to Iran "will be very clearly choosing to fuel conflict and tension over promoting peace and security." Trump administration's withdrawal from the deal in 2018 was supported by some US partners in the Middle East, particularly Israel and Arab Gulf states. [See also "U.S. Blacklists Chinese Entities, Individuals for Dealing with Iran" \(Reuters\)](#)

Netanyahu Meets 1st UAE Delegation for Historic Signing

Netanyahu met a delegation of top UAE senior officials at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport to cement a historic agreement cementing economic ties. The event marked the first official visit made by UAE diplomats to Israel since the landmark normalization agreement, known as the Abraham Accords, were signed at the White House on September 15. Israel and the UAE also signed a visa waiver treaty marking the first time the Jewish state has reached such an agreement with an Arab country. Accompanied by Israeli Foreign Minister Ashkenazi, Netanyahu also welcomed US Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, who earlier this week accompanied an Israeli delegation to Bahrain where the two sides cemented a separate normalization agreement in Manama. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the UAE delegation - led by its finance and economy ministers - were restricted to the airport and will remain on the grounds for their five-hour visit. In opening remarks made before the international press, Netanyahu welcomed Israel's newest Gulf Arab partner to Israel, and asked the delegation to "please convey to... [Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan] our deep appreciation for his groundbreaking leadership." [See also "Israel Says UAE Visit 'Making History' - Palestinians Call It 'Shameful'" \(Reuters\)](#)

Reuters

Turkey Withdraws From Base in Northwest Syria

Turkey is withdrawing troops from a military post in northwest Syria that was surrounded by Syrian gov't forces last year, but is consolidating its presence elsewhere in the region, sources familiar with the operation said. Turkish officials have in the past ruled out pulling back from a single observation post, but the sources said there was no longer any military value in staying at Morek in the northwestern Idlib region. Syrian rebels say Turkey retains between 10,000 and 15,000 troops in the pocket of northwest Syria, alongside rebel fighters backed by Ankara and jihadist forces it has committed to disarm and contain. Already home to 3.6 million Syrian refugees, Turkey is determined to prevent a further influx of people fleeing fighting. The UN says there are around 4 million people in north-west Syria, of which 2.7m have been displaced during the nine-year-old conflict. [See also "Could Assad's Regime Make a 'Deal' With the Trump Administration?" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Gantz Goes All-In Rise

By Yuval Karni

- **Blue & White Chairman and Alternate PM Benny Gantz is currently doing something that he hasn't done in his year and a half in politics: he is making threats. While faced with electoral inferiority, and after his party has taken a nosedive in the polls and his own personal image has been cracked, Gantz has presented Netanyahu and his Likud partners with the following ultimatum: either early elections or a budget. Gantz has a good case: the coalition agreement explicitly stipulates that 100 days after the government is established, it must pass a budget for the years 2020-2021. Netanyahu fudged a decision on the budget in July, precipitated a political crisis, secured another 100-day postponement—and is now once again refusing to approve the 2021 budget on time. That may be absurd, but it isn't surprising.**
- **Netanyahu wants to fully exploit the time available to him, in other words, to wait until December 23, which is the last day by law for approving the budget, and only then to decide whether elections serve him better or whether to countenance a budget to save the collapsing country. Gantz, Ashkenazi, Nissenkorn and other top Blue & White members came to the following insight in the last few days: if Netanyahu in any case has decided to take Israel to elections for the fourth time, we will preempt him and disrupt his plans. As Gabi Ashkenazi told his fellow party members: "If we're bleeding in any case, better to fight and fall on our swords." To their joy, Yoaz Hendel and Zvi Hauser have given their full support to Gantz's plan and have joined the threat against Netanyahu. These are the same Yoaz Hendel and Zvi Hauser whom Netanyahu is banking on to form a narrow 61-government under his leadership.**
- **There is a natural inclination not to take Gantz's threat seriously. He appears to be shooting blanks. In other words: how could it possibly serve his interest to have Blue & White bleed in elections? The answer is in the body of the question: precisely because his party is in such a dire situation, he knows that he has nothing to lose. So instead of letting Netanyahu decide the rules of the game—he is seizing the reins to set the agenda and to decide whether elections will be called (such as by voting in favor of a bill to dissolve the Knesset) and to decide their date. In any case, the Blue & White ministers will remain in the transitional government by law and will vote independently on bills and will no longer be bound by the coalition agreement. "It's not about us anymore," said a high-ranking Blue & White member. "The public wants elections."**
- **Gantz seems to have been imbued with a fighting spirit in the last few days. Issuing threats has been good for him. He has come across as being incisive, persuasive and even eloquent in contrast to his previous mangled speeches. The goal is to put pressure on Netanyahu and to persuade him that the die has been cast. Let me die with the Philistines (or with the Likudniks, in this case). This is the first time that Blue & White has shown that kind of combative spirit, and it has persuaded people across the political spectrum. Gantz and Ashkenazi are talking about giving two to three weeks.**

The Majority Needs a Rebellion

By Ben-Dror Yemini

- One of these days it is simply going to explode. If the trends of the past few years continue unabated in the coming number of years—the State of Israel will collapse, no less. After all, it's far easier and simpler to grasp the danger posed by a “regular” terror attack: boom, people are killed; boom, a missile hits a residential building. The story of the Haredim is far more dangerous because it is a creeping danger. The situation is growing worse, and there is no boom. A ship of a certain size will sink immediately if a whole ton is suddenly loaded onto its deck. But if just one kilo gets added to its deck every day, it will eventually sink once it reaches that tipping point.
- The trend is clear. After a certain increase in Haredi participation in the work force was recorded in 2015-2017, the trend has changed once again and participation in the workforce has dropped in the last two years, as has the number of Haredim who acquire a university degree. The news in all that pertains to an equal sharing the burden is also bad—quite bad. In 2019, 1,222 Haredim enlisted, compared to 2,774 in 2017. And even those numbers are inaccurate because many of the people who were counted as “Haredim” were not. Binyamin Netanyahu showed leadership when he served as finance minister. He cut allowances; he made it clear to the Haredim that the state could not carry them on its back forever. That yielded results. But the Netanyahu of this last decade has been a different person. They don't even need to threaten him—he preempts any threat with capitulation.
- This twisted relationship also extends to other spheres. In the spheres of kashrut, conversion, the Chief Rabbinate, the Western Wall arrangement, and many more. This is a case of the majority being coerced by a radical minority. There have always been different streams in Judaism. In the Jewish state, ironically, the ultra- Haredi stream is coercing the others. The most important Halachic rulers, such as Maimonides, adopted a very lenient approach to conversion, for example. But who is Maimonides compared with the new two or three “arbiters of the generation,” who impose their radical view that the majority of Jews in Israel and the world oppose? They are hurting Judaism, they are making it loathed, they are repelling young people from it. Now it's the coronavirus. My colleague, Nahum Barnea, wrote here yesterday quite correctly that coercion isn't going to work. Will battalions of uniformed police be able to subdue tens of thousands of battle-hungry yeshiva students? There's no chance.
- The problem is that the coercion is running in the opposite direction. For decades the majority has capitulated to the minority. Dialogue isn't going to work either, even though there are different groups with different views even within Haredi society. The problem is that the Haredi political hacks are the ones dictating rules of the game. The common good is of no interest to them. The Jewish heritage of Israel is of no interest to them. The only thing they care about is coercing the majority and getting budgets for themselves. The coronavirus has not precipitated a collapse thus far, but it is a notable milestone. The way that the Haredim are behaving—not all of them, of course, but nor is it only a

negligible minority—has made it clear that they don't care about the danger to people's lives either. This isn't just their problem; it's everyone's problem. If, God forbid, the pandemic spreads because of their lawlessness, the dead will pile up outside of Rabbi Kanievsky's shtetl as well. A lot of people, including Haredim, will pay the price. And why? Because the Haredim can. Because lawlessness has become the reigning approach. Because the minority rebels and the majority is silent. The time has come for a rebellion by the majority.

- We are “persecuted in our own country,” wrote my colleague Shoshana Chen yesterday, and expressed the genuine pain felt by the Haredi community to which she belongs. But with all due respect for her feelings, the reality is the opposite: the Haredi leaders are the persecutors. They are endangering themselves, their communities and all the Israelis. The Israeli Arabs behaved with impressive responsibility. Not so the Haredi rebels. Instead of denouncing them, what we get are crocodile tears. Now is a time of crisis. We need a leadership that will capitalize on the crisis to say: the good of all Israelis, including Haredim, is more important than continuing to capitulate to a rebellious minority.**
- We need a new national contract that is based on rights in exchange for obligations and on equality in sharing the burden and on ending the coercion in many spheres. If only Netanyahu were the one to initiate such a contract, but that isn't going to happen, so the real national camp will have to unite for that to happen. Lapid, Gantz, Ashkenazi, as well as Huldai, Peretz, Hendel and Hauser, perhaps even Bennett, as well as Haredim like Rabbi Chaim Amsalem must unite to form a coalition to save Israel. That must happen quickly, because time is passing, and at some point, even if it is not tomorrow, it will be too late.**