



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and Middle East News Update

Monday, October 26

Headlines:

- Israel to Start COVID-19 Vaccine Human Trials on Nov. 1
- Blue & White Leaders Believe No Chance to Pass Budget
- Multi-Billion Dollar Plan for Arab Municipalities Extended
- Sudan Says It Will Discuss Trade, Migration Deals with Israel
- Israel Expects Oman to Announce Normalization Next
- Qatar Might Get F-35s Despite Objections, Minister Says
- Settlers Pressure Netanyahu to Legalize Outposts
- Israel Ships Humanitarian Aid to Azerbaijan Amid Conflict

Commentary:

- Yedioth Ahronoth: “Public Courage”
- By Gilad Sharon
- Yedioth Ahronoth: “There’s No One Who Might Investigate”
- By Nahum Barnea

News Excerpts

October 26, 2020

Reuters

Israel to Start COVID-19 Vaccine Human Trials on Nov. 1

Israel will begin human trials for a potential COVID-19 vaccine developed by the Defense Ministry on Nov. 1, the ministry said. The Israel Institute for Biological Research (IIBR) began animal trials for its “BriLife” vaccine in March. The Health Ministry and an oversight committee have now given the green light to take it to the next stage. 80 volunteers aged between 18 and 55 will be monitored for 3 weeks to see if virus antibodies develop. There are no internationally approved vaccines yet, but several are in advanced trials, including from Pfizer Inc, Johnson & Johnson, AstraZeneca Plc and Moderna. Israel, with a population of 9 million, has begun easing a second nationwide [coronavirus lockdown](#) after a steady decline in the rate of daily infections. The country saw 692 new cases on Saturday - down from a peak of more than 9,000 several weeks ago. It has reported 2,372 deaths from the pandemic. [See also “Stormy Cabinet Meeting Deadlocked on Reopening of Schools, Businesses \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Blue & White Leaders Believe No Chance to Pass Budget

Blue & White leaders believe there’s no chance that Prime Minister Netanyahu will agree to pass the 2021 budget by the Dec.23 deadline, meaning new elections are imminent. Trust between the two parties is at a nadir, and news of Blue & White’s loss of hope in passing a budget and averting elections comes after it was reported that it had been plotting to make Moshe Ya’alon, head of the Telem Party, a temporary prime minister in order to oust Netanyahu. Alternate Prime Minister Benny Gantz’s party has demanded that the 2021 budget be passed together with what will now be a retroactive budget for 2020, as required in the coalition agreement. Netanyahu has balked at this step. Should the 2021 budget be approved, Netanyahu likely would be unable to avoid handing over the premiership to Gantz next October.

Times of Israel

Multi-Billion Dollar Plan for Arab Municipalities Extended

The cabinet voted to extend by a year a multi-billion-dollar program aimed at closing extensive gaps between Jewish and Arab communities in Israel. The program, known as the 922 plan was set to expire in December, with over a third of its funds still unused. While the extension was widely praised, the move also causes some tensions within the mostly Arab Joint List party, with some noting that the vote came only days after MK Mansour Abbas, who has been the Joint List point man for the 922 plan’s approval, helped Netanyahu avoid a [Knesset embarrassment](#). The plan, initiated in 2015 allocated \$2.96 billion to reduce widespread inequalities between Arab and Jewish communities. The extension will add another \$500 million to the plan through the end of 2021. The decision is even more noteworthy given the severe budget crisis due to the coronavirus and two costly national shutdowns.

Sudan Says It Will Discuss Trade, Migration Deals with Israel

Sudan and Israel will discuss agreements to cooperate on trade and [migration issues](#), the Sudanese foreign ministry said, signaling steps to implement a normalization pact after decades of hostilities. The U.S.-brokered accord made Khartoum the third Arab gov't to establish relations with Israel in the last 2 months, and the fifth since 1948. But prominent political factions in Sudan have [rejected the accord](#). Some Sudanese officials have said it should be approved by a transitional parliament that has yet to be formed over a year after mass unrest ousted autocrat Omar al-Bashir. Khartoum's foreign ministry said Sudanese and Israeli delegations would meet in the coming weeks to negotiate deals for agriculture, aviation, trade and migration. It gave no details or time frame for the talks. [See also "US Official: Sudan to Designate Hezbollah a Terror Group as Part of Israel Deal" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Israel Expects Oman to Announce Normalization Next

The next Arab country most likely to sign a normalization deal with Israel is Oman, Channel 12 reported. Washington and Jerusalem are working extensively to make the deal come to pass before the US election, the report added. However, due to Oman's recent appointment of new Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, Israeli officials cast doubt an announcement would arrive in the next 10 days as Oman is interested not to haste with its decision-making, according to Ma'ariv. Despite there not being formal relations between Israel and Oman, both have been conducting behind-the-scenes relations for some time. 2 years ago, Netanyahu visited Oman and met with the former Sultan, Qaboos bin Said. This report follows another report by [Israel Hayom](#) which suggested that Israel and Saudi Arabia could declare diplomatic relations prior to the presidential elections. As for now, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is pushing for deal, while his father, King Salman bin Abdulaziz, is putting the brakes on diplomatic development. [See also "Mossad Head: Saudi Normalization Ties Close; Post US Election Could See Progress" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Qatar Might Get F-35s Despite Objections, Minister Says

Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz said that a U.S. sale of advanced F-35 warplanes to Qatar could be possible despite Israel's objections given Qatar's links to Iran and Hamas. "I have no doubt that if they (Qatar) want it and are willing to pay, sooner or later they will get it," Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz said. "This is a supposition that we must take into account," he said, arguing that the U.S. administration "ultimately looks out for American interests," especially in the face of rival stealth jets on offer from Russia and China. U.S. officials have been open to selling the F-35 to the [UAE](#) after it and Bahrain normalized relations with Israel. But they have been tight-lipped on Qatar's bid to buy the jet. Successive U.S. administrations have sought to preserve Israeli military superiority in the region. Steinitz noted, however, that there had been past U.S. sales of advanced aircraft to Arab countries over Israeli objections. [See also "Senior Defense Officials Warn against Hiding Sale of F-35 to Saudi Arabia" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Settlers Pressure Netanyahu to Legalize Outposts

Settlers are pressing Netanyahu to authorize outposts, or at the very least, to allow their de facto legalization, in lieu of the West Bank annexation promise that has been suspended. It's the latest phase in a long tale of the fledgling Jewish communities in the West Bank, some of which are already decades old, but have yet to be legalized. The outposts phenomenon began in the mid-1990s, at the time of the Oslo Accords, when there was an understanding that Israel would refrain from authorizing new settlements. But settlers, with the tacit support of gov't departments and the IDF, continued to build new hilltop communities, that became known as outposts. The George W. Bush administration secured a pledge from then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to demolish the outposts, but he never made good on that promise. According to the Left-wing activist group Peace Now, some 42 West Bank outposts have been built in the last 8 years, 28 of which were built during President Trump's administration.

Israel Ships Humanitarian Aid to Azerbaijan Amid Conflict

Israel has shipped medical supplies and humanitarian aid to Azerbaijan for civilians who were injured in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Israel has been selling arms and military equipment to Azerbaijan for years, and now, as violence between Azerbaijan and Armenia is flaring up again, Baku has asked for Jerusalem's support. Dozens of Azeri civilians were injured in a string of attacks on the city of Ganja – the third largest city in Azerbaijan – carried out by Armenian separatists. 15 civilians have been killed and many have lost their homes. Israel complied with Baku's request for aid, supplying also equipment for those who lost their homes; such as heaters, winter clothes, blankets, first aid kits, and more. In addition, a second package delivered included expendable medical supplies, and additional medical equipment may be shipped later if needed. Israel has also offered humanitarian aid to Armenia 2 weeks ago, but Yerevan has yet to respond. Israeli Ambassador to Azerbaijan George Dick transported the aid to Ganja and laid flowers on bombsites where civilians have lost their lives in the attacks.

Public Courage

By Gilad Sharon

- **Leadership is tested at times of crisis; when everything is fine, it's no big deal. A leadership that functions well in times of emergency not only succeeds at overcoming the difficulties, it also inspires confidence and unites the public. An excellent example is Jacinda Ardern, the prime minister of New Zealand—she took effective action, with full transparency, she beat the pandemic and did not hurt the economy. That is precisely her job, and that is why she was reelected by a huge majority. Developed island-states like New Zealand, Taiwan, Japan and Singapore, as well as South Korea, which is island-like (since its border with North Korea is shut), have succeeded far better than Israel in their war against the virus. We too are like an island, our borders with our neighbors are not open, as opposed to the situation in Europe.**
- **So why is the number of dead from COVID-19 relative to the size of the population in Israel 50 times higher here than in New Zealand? Why is it 900 times higher than in Taiwan? Twenty times higher than in Japan? Fifty times higher than in Singapore? Thirty times higher than in South Korea? Why has our economy suffered a mortal blow? Why are close to a million people out of work? Why are businesses going bankrupt and collapsing? When we look at the number of people who have become infected relative to the size of the population, the disparities become even larger. We are among the worst in the world, and it didn't have to be this way.**
- **There are conditions that have to be met to succeed in this war: first, that the only considerations must be scientific and professional. The second, the public's confidence—only if the public has confidence in the sincerity of the government's intentions and in its seriousness, will it comply with the directives; if the public does not believe [in the leadership] and does not cooperate, you can't win. Neither of those two conditions were met in Israel. The scientific considerations have been overruled by political ones, and large swaths of the public don't believe the government. And why should they? When no criteria are set for closed spaces and for open spaces using scientific tools for everyone, there is room for extortion and pressure. And then absurd decisions are made, and then an entire country is in lockdown because the government capitulated to pressure coming from red localities. Gatherings of ten people were deemed permissible, but a small workplace that has fewer than ten workers was forced to shut down.**
- **The supermarkets are open, but hair salons and bookstores are closed. Why? Just because. When there is no logic, people do what they want. And when a rebbe rebels against the state and nothing happens to him, and the budget from the state continues to flow [to his yeshivas], why should citizens have any confidence? That is why our Likud has lost so much ground, and mood parties like Yamina are projected to win over 20 seats. Who is the 20th candidate on Yamina's list? Who is its tenth candidate? That is why a party of nothing is taking large bites out of us, the Likud. Leadership means displaying public courage; it means fearlessly saying "I'm not passing a budget for 2021**

because I haven't decided yet whether I will honor the alternating premiership arrangement."

- **That is the truth, everyone knows it, so why not simply speak the truth? That is a thousand times more dignified than the ridiculous idea of passing a budget for eight days. Leadership means holding an in-depth debate with the security establishment, as is the accepted and as ought to be done, to hear other opinions and then to decide. And then to say, courageously: "I have decided that the peace with the Gulf states is more important than preventing an Arab army from having F-35 planes." Why conceal? Leadership is self-confidence, doing what needs to be done without fear, without capitulating and without zigzagging. We can still emerge well from this crisis. All we need is the courage to act based on professional criteria, and the strength to withstand pressure.**

There's No One Who Might Investigate

By Nahum Barnea

- There are some flashlights that shine backwards: Netanyahu's false denial about the arms deal between the United States and the United Arab Emirates shed new light on his conduct in the submarines affair. Questions from the one affair correspond with questions from the other; the discomfort caused by the one affair corresponds with the discomfort caused by the other. In all that pertains to the United Arab Emirates, the facts are fairly clear: Netanyahu hid from Israel's top security establishment officials the talks ahead of the three-way agreement. The arms deal was a condition that the leaders of the Emirates posed to the Americans. They signed the normalization agreement after they had been given assurances that Israel would not object. Netanyahu, who described the report about that as "absolute fake news," spoke a non-truth. When the security establishment began negotiations with the US administration in an attempt to mend the damage that had been done, Netanyahu acted as if those negotiations had nothing to do with him. He delivered peace; it was Gantz who was responsible for the price that was paid. The submarines affair should be divided into two separate issues.
- The first is the consent that Netanyahu covertly gave to the German government to manufacture advanced submarines for the Egyptian Navy. The second has to do with the various Israeli acquisitions: the number of submarines; the insistence that the patrol ships be bought from ThyssenKrupp; the decision to buy anti-submarine vessels; and the involvement of Mickey Ganor, David Shimron, Eliezer Marom and a long list of other people who are suspected of allegedly sharing the spoils. Regarding the Egyptian deal, Netanyahu concealed [his consent] from the top tiers of the Israeli security establishment, just like he did with the sale of the F-35 planes to the Emirates. The decision itself may have been reasonable, considering the other alternatives, but the concealment—which is against the law and against protocol—is akin to driving through an intersection on a red light. "A foolish mistake," was how the former National Security Council director, Yaakov Amidror, described Netanyahu's behavior. It turns out that it wasn't a mistake, but a recurring pattern of behavior. Netanyahu is heedless. Consent for the Egyptian deal was given in writing. We don't know who signed the letter. Was it the National Security Council director at the time, Yossi Cohen? Was it his deputy, Jacob Nagel? Was it the prime minister's envoy, Yitzhak Molcho? Or perhaps it was the cabinet secretary, Avichai Mandelblit?
- The picture is even more complex in all that pertains to the issue of the military acquisitions. The National Security Council back then had in its ranks a large number of retired Israel Navy officers, friends of Mickey Ganor, the agent for the German shipyard, ThyssenKrupp. The National Security Council pressed to have the defensive ships and the anti-submarine vessels bought from the Germans without a tender. The director general of the Defense Ministry at that point was Maj. Gen. (res.) Dan Harel. No one disputes Harel's integrity ("a ruler is crooked next to him," was how Liberman described him). Harel insisted on issuing a tender.

- Five shipyards submitted tenders—from South Korea, Italy and Spain. The Germans didn't submit a tender, but in a surprise move dropped their price, via the National Security Council, to the floor. This is where the peak moment arrives: following the negotiations that were held behind the Defense Ministry's back, the National Security Council drafted memorandum of understanding with the Germans. Only the Defense Ministry has the authority to sign a MOU. The document was faxed by the National Security Council to the Defense Ministry. Harel refused to sign. Within a few hours, a new MOU came in over the fax from the National Security Council, different from the previous document. The seventh submarine, the one that Netanyahu demanded, was no longer cited by the MOU; also gone were the needless anti-submarine vessels. The Defense Ministry was asked to destroy any copy of the first MOU.
- One might say that Harel saved Netanyahu; his refusal to sign a document that was prima facie illegal allowed the State Attorney's Office to exempt Netanyahu from being questioned. He also saved Yossi Cohen, currently the Mossad director, from getting mixed up in something that might have cut short his career. We, in the meantime, have been left with a lot of questions. No evidence of criminal wrongdoing has yet come to light in connection to Netanyahu and this affair. There was [evidence of] his willingness to waste billions of shekels; there was [evidence of] his disrespect for the law and protocol; there was also [evidence of] hastily-made decisions, bad management, turning a blind eye to corruption and arrogance.
- Ostensibly, those are issues that ought to be investigated. The question is: by whom? The answer is: by no one. The attorney general isn't supposed to investigate a prime minister's questionable performance. That isn't his job. The defense minister can announce that the Defense Ministry will investigate, but the scope of that investigation will be restricted to the Defense Ministry itself. The Knesset can form a parliamentary commission of inquiry, but it will be buried beneath the noise made by the politicians. A state commission of inquiry could investigate, but governments only tend to form commissions of inquiry when they are hard put to withstand the pressure from the street. The Israeli street is currently preoccupied with other problems.
- The norm in the United States in cases such as these is to appoint a special investigator. The Americans' experience with that hasn't been great. Kenneth Starr, who investigated Bill Clinton's various affairs, made a lot of noise and wasted capital but failed to come up with anything. Robert Muller, who investigated Trump's ties with the Russians, netted a few small fish, but drowned in the political fight. It is important that we learn what happened in the submarines affair; it is even more important that we learn the lessons from it. It looks like that affair is not going to be investigated. The media did a lot. In order to learn lessons we either are going to have to wait for Ganor's testimony in his trial or, in the more likely scenario, we are going to have to wait for the archives to be opened in another 50 or 100 years.