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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

October 5, 2020

Ynet News

Israel Ranks 3rd in the World for Virus Deaths per Capita

Israel had the third-highest coronavirus deaths per capita, according to data published by Oxford University. The data shows the only two other countries that recorded a higher death rate per capita were Argentina and Guam. Israel has seen a massive resurgence of the disease, with the daily toll of new COVID-19 cases reaching over 9,000 a day, prompting the gov't to impose a second nationwide lockdown. The Oxford University findings confirm a report by the IDF's Intelligence Directorate, which said that virus deaths per capita in the country have been among the world's highest. Since the start of the pandemic, 1,692 Israelis have succumbed to the disease. At least 57% of the victims were over the age of 80, 25% aged 70-79 and less than 1% under the age of 39. [See also “‘Cautious’ Netanyahu Resists Pressure to Lift Restrictions as 900 Seriously Ill” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Times of Israel

Violent Clashes Erupt Between Cops, Ultra-Orthodox

Police arrested 13 people in Bnei Brak during violent clashes that erupted as police tried to shutter an ultra-Orthodox synagogue, where hundreds were praying in violation of the ongoing lockdown. Videos from the scenes showed violent arrests of some of the protesters, which sparked accusations of disproportionate force. In one video, a cop could be seen violently kneeling a man in the face, as several other officers wrestled him to the ground. Other clips showed worshipers again gathering in the synagogue, despite the police effort to close it down. Violent clashes also broke out in ultra-Orthodox areas of Jerusalem, as police tried to enforce the measures. Police used stun grenades to disperse a prohibited gathering, according to Channel 12. [See also “Digital Anti-Netanyahu Demonstrations Attract Thousands of Israelis” \(AI-Monitor\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Bipartisan Bill Gives Israel a Veto on Middle East Arms Sales

A bipartisan bill introduced in the House of Representatives would enhance protections for Israel's qualitative military edge (QME) to include an effective Israeli veto on US arms sales to the Middle East. Existing law already guarantees Israel a QME in the Middle East, but Congress — not Israel — is the arbiter of whether an arms sale meets QME standards. Most of the sponsors are Democrats, including a number of Jewish lawmakers, among them Schneider, Elaine Luria of Virginia, Max Rose of New York, Josh Gottheimer of New Jersey, and Ted Deutch and Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Florida. Jewish Democrats expressed alarm after it was revealed that, parallel with the U.S.-brokered normalization deal between Israel and the UAE, the Trump administration was negotiating the sale of state-of-the-art F-35 stealth combat jets to the UAE. Israel opposes the sale. AIPAC, the prominent Israel lobby, supports the new measure.

Gantz Says Turkey, Iran Oppose Peace

Defense Minister Benny Gantz held a first-of-its-kind town hall with Arab journalists, highlighting efforts by Turkey and Iran to destabilize the region and undermine efforts to achieve peace. Among those taking part were Mohamed Al Hammadi, the editor of the Alroeya newspaper, and Ahdeya Ahmed Al-Sayed of Bahrain, who, during a webinar last week, described harassment they experienced for taking part in an unprecedented online forum that brought together more than a dozen Arab media people and Israeli journalists and gov't officials. They were joined by two Saudi journalists in the call, which was organized by the Arab Council for Regional Integration. During the call, Gantz focused on efforts by Turkey and Iran to undermine the recently signed normalization agreements between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain, and their continued support for conflicts in the region. He accused the two nations of "denying promotion of peace and supporting regional aggression." [See also "Turkey Has Become a Destabilizing Force in the Middle East" \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

Russian Amb: 'No Problem' Selling S-400 to Iran

Russia's ambassador to Iran said Moscow would have "no problem" selling Tehran an advanced air defense system when the UN arms embargo expires later this month. The Trump administration, however, unilaterally asserted last month that "snapback" UN sanctions are now in force and vowed to punish those that violate them. "As you know we have provided Iran with S-300. Russia does not have any problem to deliver S-400 to Iran and it did not have any problem before either," he said. He was referring to the delivery of the S-300 following the signing of the 2015 deal between Tehran and world powers that placed curbs on the Iranian nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. Israel unsuccessfully sought to block the sale of the S-300 system, which analysts say could impede a potential Israeli strike on Tehran's nuclear facilities and would likely oppose providing Iran with the S-400. [See also "Syria's Assad Says Russian Bases in His Country Keep Balance of Power in Region" \(Reuters\)](#)

Palestinians Skeptical About Fatah-Hamas Election Deal

A meeting of leaders of Palestinian factions that was supposed to take place to discuss holding new elections has been postponed indefinitely, apparently due to ongoing differences between the ruling Fatah faction and Hamas. The meeting was supposed to approve the Fatah-Hamas understandings reached between the two sides in Turkey 2 weeks ago. Fatah and Hamas reportedly agreed to hold elections for the PA presidency and parliament, the Palestine Legislative Council (PLC). In spite of the apparent rapprochement between Fatah and Hamas, Palestinians have regarded the understandings on the elections with a fair amount of skepticism. "It seems that neither Abbas nor Hamas are really interested in holding new elections," a Palestinian political analyst told The Jerusalem Post. [See also "Fatah Accuses PA Government of 'Discrimination' Against Gaza" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Sudanese Official: Normalization is a Sudanese Interest

Deputy head of Sudan's Transitional Military Council Gen. Mohammed Hamadan Dagalo, has regularly voiced his support for normalizing diplomatic relations with Israel, but in an interview with local reporters, he outdid even himself, leaving the country's political echelon with absolutely no doubt about the military's views on the matter. Dagalo has not feared repercussions for his repeated support for normalization. Normalization with a key African country such as Sudan is important in the long-term for Israel for several reasons: Sudan's strategic location; its potential for development once it is removed from the list of country's that support terror; and just as importantly – the effect it would have on the Arab League and other strategic Muslim countries in Africa. [See also “US Push for Arab-Israel Ties Divides Sudanese Leaders” \(AP\)](#)

West Bank: New Home Building in at Least 25 Settlements

Construction is slated to restart in at least 25 settlements after the Higher Planning Council for Judea and Samaria ([West Bank](#)) looked set to approve and advance new homes. Prime Minister Netanyahu had pledged to convene the council - which last met in February - as a de facto freeze on building seems to have been lifted. If construction does duly recommence, it will mark the first advancement of settlement activity since Israel recently signed the much-vaunted normalization deals with the UAE and Bahrain. Despite Israeli denials to the contrary, officials from both Gulf states declared that a cessation of Israel's plans to claim sovereignty over parts of the West Bank was critical to the deal's signing. The Trump peace plan lays out that eventually, Israel would eventually be able to apply its sovereignty to all Jewish communities in the West Bank, although no timeframe for that has been initiated. There will likely be pressure from Arab states and the international community for Israel to evacuate all its settlements and withdraw to the 1949 Armistice Lines - although that includes cities with tens of thousands of people living in them, which will not easily be given up. [See also “De-Facto Freeze Broken, IDF to Approve New West Bank Settler Homes” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Netanyahu's Dilemma

By Yuval Karni

- **The national unity government, the so-called coronavirus government, was sworn in on May 17 this year with a lot of hope and optimism as well as broad public support. The public wanted it because it was weary after three awful elections that had led us to an impasse. The public wanted a responsible and cohesive leadership at the height of the accursed coronavirus crisis pandemic to extricate it from the deep crisis. Netanyahu and Gantz formed a parity government for the sake of the Israeli public. It even formed a reconciliation cabinet. Netanyahu calmed the skeptics: “Without tricks and without shticks,” he promised. On paper, the government certainly did look promising. I remember the opinion and commentary pieces urging the establishment of a unity government: anything to avoid a fourth election. But all that remained on paper. Five months after being formed, there appears to be no hope left for the coronavirus government. The political crisis has worsened, the parties are preoccupied with mounting their own campaigns, Netanyahu is preoccupied with suppressing the demonstrations, the coronavirus cabinet was dumped, and Blue and White is deliberating whether to stick with its flawed partnership with the Likud. Blue and White’s members are agonizing. Poor them. Not to mention the many times that cabinet meetings and meetings of the Ministerial Committee for Legislation were canceled. Instead of order, what we got was a lockdown.**
- **Asaf Zamir’s resignation honed for Blue and White the realization that Gantz’s alternating premiership was becoming less likely. In fact, Blue and White is assuming there will be a crisis. “We have a future until December 2020, after that Netanyahu is going to precipitate early elections,” said a top Blue and White minister. Their assessment is that Netanyahu will invent some mad-up crisis over the budget toward the end of the year, which will bring about elections in March 2021. As one despondent politician said, the situation is so bad that it’s wouldn’t be so terrible if it were to become worse. Binyamin Netanyahu can’t live for single moment with the current parity government. The nightmare of having to leave the residence on Balfour Street is unimaginable. So, what can prevent that from happening? First of all, the coronavirus. Israel, under Netanyahu’s leadership, has changed from being green to being one of the reddest countries in the world. The worse the coronavirus crisis becomes, the more Netanyahu is liable to pay a political price. The scope of socio-economic crisis is still unknown. There is a black cloud hovering over us.**
- **Ironically, the one person who might still save Benny Gantz’s lost alternating premiership is Yamina Chairman Naftali Bennett from the opposition. Netanyahu is facing a dilemma, say Likud officials. Benny Gantz is still the easiest partner for him, but then he will have to pay the price of keeping the alternating premiership arrangement. With Bennett, he could hold elections, but there’s no way to know what the outcome is going to be. Yes, the coronavirus is out there, but our leaders have others priorities: how to get through the next elections safely.**

They're Scared

By Gilad Sharon

- **Something bad is happening to us in the Likud. Our representatives in the government and in the Knesset are scared, they refrain from stating their opinions. Do they even have an opinion of their own? How is it that all of them think the same thing? The party that was perhaps the first to elect its representatives in a primary, a party that was the icon of democracy, is now run under a regime of fear. The party's institutions, like in a Kafka story, spy on and monitor the thousands of Likud members, and anyone who is suspect is immediately ousted from the party ranks. And if they have a problem, they are invited to write, to come and to testify before the tribunal, and to prove, with exemplary evidence, that they are loyal. They are traitors unless proven otherwise. I know people, people who have been Likud members for years, long before anyone invented the New Likudniks, who were suddenly denied party membership for no reason. Thousands have had that happen and there are more to come. When Feiglin was in the Likud, when in some places there were more Likud members than there were Likud voters, nobody thought to check. Why? That was essentially an attempt to dictate the Knesset list without people voting for the Likud in the elections. What are the people who preside on the Likud court thinking? How can they sleep at night?**
- **The loyalty of the Likud members must be in the following order: first to their country, then to the path of their movement, and then they can be loyal to a person. At present, however, the order has been inverted, anyone who does not shout amen to Bibi is branded a traitor. They are cast as leftists in disguise, underground anarchists, as having been blackmailed by the forces of evil, as belonging to some secret conspiracy. What happened? Can't someone can be displeased by the wretched handling of the pandemic and still be a loyal Likudnik? Aren't they allowed to be upset that we failed to apply sovereignty during the term of a president like Trump without being branded a traitor? Can't they be angry about the impotence that has been shown and the abandonment of Abera Mengistu and Hisham Sayyad and Oron Shaul and Shaul Goldin, without being viewed as the enemy of the right wing? Can't they cry out that Khan al-Ahmar is still standing despite the High Court of Justice's approval to demolish it? Can't they be rankled by the construction freeze in Jerusalem?**
- **I too am upset by the behavior of the State Attorney's Office. We deserve to be given explanations as to why Ruth David is walking around free. Why the Umm al-Hiran affair was whitewashed—decide, was he or wasn't he a terrorist? Not based on Bibi's interests, but based on the truth. What did the attorney general mean when he said that he was being framed? How is it that the state attorney asked serving judges and lawyers who are dependent on the State Attorney's Office for their livelihood to give interviews on his behalf? All of those are serious and need to be corrected. Corrected, but not destroyed. What have we in the Likud done in the past 11 years to correct any of that? Why have you only woken up now? And having said all that, there are some things that simply aren't**

done. One does not hold a demonstration inside a courtroom—is there anymore more basic than that?

- How could you, Likud ministers and MKs, how could you do that? Was it fear that led you to stand there behind him, each of you like one of the three monkeys, the one that speaks no evil? A single wicked person is enough to do something bad, but you also need a lot of cowards who stand on the sidelines and who are silent. The country is not being run properly, and we Likudniks can also see that. The considerations are not always what is best for the country. That is wrong, this is to the shame of all those who see and know and say nothing. The Likud is a magnificent movement, tens of thousands of patriots are wonderful members of the party. If we continue with the dictatorship and with instilling fear, large numbers of our supporters will vote for Yamina, as the polls show. A party of nothing is growing at our expense because they see the rot. The good of the country and the good of the Likud requires that people lose their fear and that some courageous people appear.