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Israel and Middle East News Update

Friday, October 9

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News Excerpts

October 9, 2020

Times of Israel

Gantz, Netanyahu Clash Ahead of Budget Deadline

Defense Minister Gantz sent a strongly worded open letter to Prime Minister Netanyahu, demanding the passage of a 2021 state budget and accusing the premier of violating the coalition agreement and of harming Israeli citizens in order to avoid having to hand Gantz the premiership. The letter drew a seething response from Netanyahu and his Likud party, which accused Gantz's Blue & White of being an opposition within the government, in an exchange that highlighted the possibility new elections will be called in the coming months. No elections are currently set to take place, but speculation is rampant that an early vote will be triggered sometime in the next months, as bad blood between Netanyahu and Gantz continues to brew in the shadow of a budget deadline at the end of the year that could automatically fell the government. [See also "Could Budget Crisis Lead to Early Election?" \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Thousands Protest PM; Demonstrators Report Attacks

At least two protesters were arrested in Tel Aviv after thousands of Israelis protested all across Israel against Netanyahu, a day after the government approved a one-week extension on the emergency regulations which allow the limiting of demonstrations. Throughout the day, hundreds of protesters gathered in Tel Aviv and at the Jaffa Clock Tower roundabout, chanting "we won't give up until Netanyahu resigns." Demonstrators are carried signs reading "We are the hope" and waving pink flags. In Tel Aviv, protests are held at Rabin Square, Habima Square, Ben-Zion and Hashmonaim junctions. The restrictions limit protesters to a one-kilometer radius of their homes and allow them to protest in groups of 20 people or less. The Knesset's legislative committee is expected to convene on Sunday to debate the extension of the emergency regulations. [See also "Bank of Israel Head Calls for Reopening of Small Businesses Amid Drop in Virus Cases" \(I24 News\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Cabinet to Vote on UAE Peace Agreement Next Week

The cabinet will hold a vote on the peace treaty with the UAE on Monday. There has not been a full cabinet meeting since Prime Minister Netanyahu returned from the signing ceremony at the White House, almost a month before the planned vote. The agreement is expected to get unanimous support from the ministers. Netanyahu promised Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi in September that the agreement would go to a cabinet vote. Though the Prime Minister's Office said the agreement would also be brought to the Knesset, it is not yet on the legislature's agenda. Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee chairman Zvi Hauser asked Knesset Speaker Yariv Levin to make sure that Netanyahu brings the agreements before the panel, so it can review all of the security ramifications of the agreement before it goes to a plenum vote.

Reuters

Israel Signs Deal with Jordan to Open Airspace

Israel has signed an aviation agreement with [Jordan](#) that will allow flights from the UAE and Bahrain to fly through Israeli airspace. The deal had been discussed for years, but the neighbors were only able to finalize it after Israel and the two Gulf Arab states signed a historic agreement last month to normalize ties, Israel's Transportation Ministry said. Jordanian officials had no immediate comment. With commercial planes now able to fly through the Israel-Jordan corridor, flight times for some routes between Asia and Europe and North America, including flights from Bahrain and the UAE, will be shorter, the ministry said. Its statement did not specify any other countries that could benefit from the new arrangement. European air traffic control agency Eurocontrol, based in Brussels, helped make the aviation deal happen, the ministry added. [See also "From Friday: Iraq and Saudi-Bound Planes in Israeli Airspace" \(Ynet News\)](#)

I24 News

Turkey Offers Help in Organizing Palestinian Elections

Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu said Ankara is ready to assist the Palestinian Authority in organizing new elections, the Anadolu news agency reported. Cavusoglu, a close confidant of President Erdogan, later confirmed the report in a tweet, writing that he was holding talks with the Palestinian Authority's (PA) top diplomatic official. "Palestinian Foreign Minister Riad Malki and I spoke on a video conference," Cavusoglu said in a tweet. "We will work together against attempts to undermine the two-state solution." He added: "We are ready to help in the organization of future Palestinian elections and also support the reconciliation" of the various Palestinian factions. "We will always be at the side of our Palestinian brothers." The two largest Palestinian parties, Fatah - led by PA chairman Mahmoud Abbas - and the Gaza-based terrorist organization Hamas agreed to hold elections "within six months" following a round of talks at the end of September. According to officials from both camps, the agreement between Hamas and Fatah specifically provides for the holding of legislative and presidential elections, which would be the first in nearly 15 years. [See also "MEPs Call to Defund Palestinian Education Over Anti-Israel Incitement in Schoolbooks" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Times of Israel

Assad: No Talks with Israel Without Return of Golan Heights

Syrian President Bashar Assad said in an interview with Russian state news that peace talks with Israel would only take place if the Israelis return the Golan Heights to Syrian control. Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria during the 1967 Six Day War and the two countries have been technically at war ever since. Assad's statements seemingly came in response to recent speculation that Syria is interested in negotiations with Israel in order to alleviate crushing economic sanctions imposed by the US. Asked about normalization with Israel, Assad said that normalization is possible "only when we can reclaim our land, it is very simple," he said. Assad also emphasized in the interview that Syria was not negotiating with Israel. In June, American legislation called the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act came into force and represented a vast financial pressure campaign on the Syrian government for its human rights abuses.

Lebanon's Sunni Leader Hariri Urges Revival of French Plan

Lebanon's leading Sunni Muslim politician, former Prime Minister al-Hariri, called for the restoration of a French plan to lift the nation out of its worst financial crisis since its 1975-1990 civil war. Former colonial power France, which has led foreign aid efforts, has tried to rally Lebanese leaders to launch reforms to tackle the crisis. But they have failed to agree a new government - the first step in the French roadmap - and drawn a rebuke from French President Macron. Lebanon urgently needs foreign cash to get out of a financial meltdown which has slashed the value of the currency since last year. Talks on a new cabinet hit a logjam as politicians wrangled over ministerial posts, with Iran-backed Hezbollah demanding they name the finance minister. Hariri and Hezbollah have blamed each other for the deadlock. President Aoun will hold consultations with lawmakers to pick a new prime minister. Hariri added that he would only return as prime minister - a post he has already held three times - if there was agreement by Lebanon's fractious parties on securing an International Monetary Fund deal. [See also "Report: In Same Room at Maritime Negotiations, Lebanese Won't Talk to Israelis" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Nobel Peace Prize Goes to UN World Food Programme

The United Nations food agency, the World Food Programme (WFP), won the Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to combat hunger and improve conditions for peace in areas affected by conflict. The Rome-based organization says it helps some 97 million people in about 88 countries each year, and that one in nine people worldwide still do not have enough to eat. "The need for international solidarity and multilateral cooperation is more conspicuous than ever," Berit Reiss-Andersen, chairwoman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, told a news conference. The WFP is a driving force in efforts to prevent the use of hunger as a weapon of war and conflict, with the COVID-19 outbreak further boosting its relevance, she said. "The coronavirus pandemic has contributed to a strong upsurge in the number of victims of hunger in the world," the Nobel committee said in its citation. "Until the day we have a medical vaccine, food is the best vaccine against chaos. "There is an estimate within the World Food Programme that there will be 265 million starving people within a year, so of course this is also a call to the international community not to underfund the World Food Programme." The prize is worth around \$1.1 million and will be presented in Oslo on Dec. 10.

A Vicious Calculation

By Yedidia Stern

- **The recent behavior by some Haredim is impossible to understand. What was the Belzer Rebbe thinking when he convened his Hasids in the thousands, in violation of the public health instructions, while the Angel of Death was waltzing in his courtyard and was plucking more and more of his Hasids? It is heartbreaking to see a Belzer teenager forced to sit shiva on his own because his father, grandfather and uncle became infected and passed away. They potentially could have still been with us had the rebbe decided to fight the virus. How did thousands of Hasids have the gall to crowd together at the funeral of the Ashdod rabbi who died of COVID-19? Don't they understand that some of them will soon join him as a result? The Haredi leadership, in the main, is not in denial about the coronavirus and is very cautious when it comes to matters of life and death. Nor is it animated by a desire either to force the state to yield or to refute its authority. Regrettably, it faces a choice between two tragic options: living with either the mortal risk or with the spiritual risk that is inherent in the war on the coronavirus. From their vantage point, they have to accept physical, mortal risk in order to minimize the spiritual risk. Following is the cold calculation that they have made and which now informs their behavior:**
- **The physical risk faced by the Haredim is less severe than the risk that is faced by the rest of the population. Approximately two-thirds of all Haredim are under the age of 30, and their symptoms will consequently be relatively light. They are now infecting one other in their schools despite themselves, or even knowingly, with the goal of being able to go back to leading their regular lives notwithstanding the coronavirus and to develop herd immunity (even though that has yet to be proven effective). There is also a practical difficulty: if the yeshivas are closed, the young people will have to return home to crowded homes—seven square meters per person—which make quarantining impossible, in homes in which their vulnerable parents live.**
- **Infection is inevitable, they argue, and better it should be deliberate, while away at school, far from the older people at home. The spiritual risk, as they see it, is far more egregious: the Haredi way of life is based on community. There is no way to preserve the Haredim's unique and intense material and the spiritual way of life without the powerful embrace of community—three prayers a day in quorums, studies from morning till evening in schools, crowding around the rabbinical leadership's source of energy, events marking the rites of passage from circumcision to funerals. Demanding that Haredi young people disengage from the community that envelopes and cushions them for an unknown period of time—until a vaccine is available—is viewed in Haredi circles as an educational disaster; an option that if chosen, will make it impossible for them to return to their previous way of life. The Haredim fear the next generation's spiritual loss. Countries go to war to protect their national interests even when they know that doing so will come at a cost in human life.**

- In this case as well, in the war to preserve the Haredi way of life, there will be actual victims, but they will be relatively few in number thanks to the age breakdown and they are needed to guarantee victory in the principal battle—the battle to forge the Haredi identity. Nevertheless, the Haredi position must be rejected for reasons of fairness, efficiency and health. First, the Haredim are not an autonomy inside a country but are part of Israeli society, in which there must be mutual responsibility among the different groups. The Haredi choice is selfish because it affects the others. The large number of Haredim who have fallen ill place a heavy burden on the hospitals, which are being stretched thin. Should an elderly secular man pay the price of securing Haredi identity with his life? Is the mortal blow to the economy justified for the sake of promoting Haredi interests?
- Second, the Haredim underestimate the significance of the hatred felt toward them by the general public. The anger over their failure to serve in the army and their excessive reliance on the public coffers will be nothing compared to the volcano that is going to erupt against them as a result of the current crisis, and I hope that I am proved wrong. The Haredim's vicious calculation is liable to run up against a counter vicious calculation by the majority, which will use its strength against them powerfully. Their behavior is short-sighted even from a cost- benefit perspective.
- Third: medically, evidence is accumulating that even among young asymptomatic people the virus can cause significant, long term damage—in various organs, in fertility, in cognition. How dare the rabbis endanger the health of the Haredi masses? Were the Israeli leadership to handle the crisis in a professional manner, it would listen to the Haredim's distress and find a solution, in the form of rules of behavior that are adapted to their unique situation, while strictly enforcing any deviation from the rules, for example, by cutting budgets to yeshiva and to organizations that break the law. It has refrained from doing that with criminal negligence because of the politicization of the handling of the crisis. A future commission of inquiry will no doubt address that. In the meantime, Israel is one of the reddest countries on the planet.

A New Contract

By Orit Nesieli-Lavi

- **There is a direct link between the Haredi fight against having their sons drafted into the IDF and the separatism and lack of solidarity that some of them have shown in the war against the coronavirus. Opposition to compulsory service long ago became a banner that the Haredi political parties like to raise. The equal sharing of the burden has served for years as the glue that holds coalitions together, on the one hand, while also serving as the catalyst that hastens the dissolution of coalition governments, on the other. By the bye, the Haredi politicians have tried to persuade the Israeli public that the yeshiva students are “killed in the Torah’s tent” [i.e. they sacrifice themselves by being yeshiva students] and that they shoulder a spiritual burden for the sake of the entire Israeli public [or Jewish people, depending on context]. Along came the coronavirus and proved to anyone who still needed proof that many of them simply don’t give a damn about Israeli society.**
- **Something bad has come over Haredi society. During the first wave of the coronavirus it seemed to us that we were all in the same boat, but then along came the second wave in which Hasidic sects and prominent rabbis decided that they were above the law, in some cases doing so with political support and in other cases without it. The large funeral that was held in Ashdod for the Pittsburgher Rebbe in defiance of all the rules of social distancing is just one example of the Hasids’ decision to repudiate the State of Israel’s laws and its very authority as the sovereign. That was preceded by the flights that arrived from New York during Passover, transporting several people who were confirmed to be sick with COVID-19. Also along that continuum one might cite the pressure to allow flights to and from Ukraine for Rosh Hashanah, the decision to open the synagogues on Yom Kippur and the opposition that was voiced by the Haredi spiritual leaders to shutting down the Haredi schools (Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky during the first wave). There have been numerous first-hand reports about several Haredi sects that have deliberately chosen to self-infect so as to achieve “herd immunity.” That is the practical definition of anarchy.**
- **Allow me to state clearly: the Haredi sector is not monolithic and, as a rule, generalizations tend to be unjust. Having said that, we aren’t talking about fringe groups; rather, at issue are the larger Hasidic sectors, such as the Belzer Hasids, who held a huge wedding a few weeks ago; the Vizhnitzer Hasids, which held a large wedding in Haifa and a large Tish in Bnei Brak on the evening following Yom Kippur; not to mention the mass-infection that occurred on Rosh Hashanah among the Gerer Hasids. To be fair, alongside those public events, we ought not to forget that many Haredi citizens comply with the coronavirus-related directives, are an active part of the workforce, pay their taxes, serve in the army and are part of the mosaic of Israeli society. But the numbers brook no dispute: the infection rate in Haredi society is far higher than the relative size of that sector in Israeli society.**

- **The populist equivalency that was drawn between prayer services in synagogues and demonstrations, as well as the discourse that was rooted in “what-aboutism,” ultimately resulted in a full-scale breakdown and a surge in morbidity. Even in the midst of a pandemic that recognizes no borders, petty politics prevailed over common sense. But no one who routinely follows the Israeli political arena was surprised. Political considerations that are confused with a sincere desire to be considerate of the Haredim’s special needs have historically led to ongoing capitulation by Israeli governments over the years to Haredi demands. Their representatives in the Knesset have skillfully leveraged their power to free the yeshiva students from the yoke of military service and to enforce through legislation norms that large swaths of Israeli society repudiate in all that pertains to individual rights, kashrut, hametz, public transportation on the Sabbath and so on. The brazen and defiant decision to pay the rules and laws no heed during the coronavirus pandemic are an expression of disrespect that the general public has a very hard time swallowing.**
- **Before anyone complains that I am voicing prejudice and stereotypes, it is important to say that critique of the developments in the Haredi sector is complex and in no way does it stem from a hatred of Haredim. Having said that, it is crucial that we recognize that Israeli society won’t be able over time to carry on its back communities that oppose on ideological grounds an equal sharing of the economic, medical and military burden. The numbers speak for themselves; the Haredi cities are the poorest cities, with low employment rates that consequently mean low wages and low tax contributions. The widespread morbidity in those cities has only served to hone the realization that small population groups can’t live in isolation behind walls and in separate cantons in the tiny State of Israel. The reality of a state within a state might serve the needs of a handful of politicians with very narrow interests, but that comes at a very high cost for all of the citizens. On the morning after the coronavirus, there will be no choice but to write a new contract between the Haredim and Israeli society. Work on that new contract needs to be begun immediately.**