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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

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Jerusalem Post

Benny Gantz Warns Election to Be Initiated Soon

The next time Prime Minister Netanyahu and Alternate Prime Minister Gantz meet, Gantz will inform Netanyahu that their political partnership is over, a source close to Gantz told Jerusalem Post. Netanyahu and Gantz spoke one after another in a special session that approved the normalization deal with [Bahrain](#). Asked about the timing for his decision, Gantz said “not much more time.” When Netanyahu spoke in the plenum, he made a point of picking fights with opposition leader Yair Lapid and Yamina chairman Naftali Bennett, who are expected to be his main rivals in the next election, while not addressing Gantz at all. Gantz, by contrast, reached out to Netanyahu and urged him to resolve their ongoing dispute over the state budget. [See also “Gantz Urges Netanyahu to Avert Budget ‘Disaster,’ Warns Early Elections Nearing” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Israel Hayom

Israel to Send Delegation to Sudan to Firm up Normalization

Israel plans to send its [first delegation](#) to Sudan on Sunday to firm up the countries' US-brokered announcement that they would normalize relations, a source briefed on the provisional itinerary said. The Prime Minister's Office, which has spearheaded outreach to Khartoum, had no immediate comment. Nor did Sudanese officials. Sudan followed the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in agreeing to establish formal ties with Israel under a diplomatic drive dubbed "The Abraham Accords" by the Trump administration. The administration's decision last month to remove Sudan from the US list of terrorism sponsors helped pave the way. Israel and Sudan have said they planned to begin by opening economic and trade links, with an initial focus on agriculture. [See also “Israeli Delegation Visits Dubai to Pave Way for Investments, Trade Ties” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Palestinians Declare Three Days of Mourning for Saeb Erekat

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas declared a three-day mourning period for [Saeb Erekat](#), the chief Palestinian negotiator who died after contracting COVID-19. "The departure of the brother and the friend, the great fighter Saeb Erekat, represents a big loss for Palestine and for our people," Abbas' office said in a statement. "We feel deep sorrow for losing him, especially at such difficult times the Palestinian cause is living through." "Saeb lived a life full of thought, love, forgiveness and peace, and he will be dearly missed," Erekat's family said in a statement. "Saeb has shown an extraordinary patience and resilience, with the same determination that has characterized his career to achieve freedom for Palestine and a just and lasting peace in our region. [See also “Erekat Was the Face of '67, and Died as Idea Was Revived” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

New Housing Permits to Bolster Jewish Presence in Hebron

Hebron's Jewish residential section may finally witness new construction underway for more housing units. Pending a decision by the Jerusalem District Court, two areas of Hebron are slated to undergo a facelift to make room for young couples. Considered to be the second-holiest city in Judaism and contains the Tomb of the Patriarchs, Hebron is home to roughly 800 Jewish residents who live surrounded by some 200,000 Palestinians. Control of the city was divided as part of the 1997 Hebron Agreement, whereby the Palestinian Authority controls 80% of the city in an area known as H1, while Israel controls the remaining 20%, H2, where most of the Jewish community lives. According to Peace Now, the Higher Planning Council of the Civil Administration approved the issuance of a building permit for the construction of a new neighborhood in the heart of Hebron. The Hebron municipality, as well as Peace Now, filed objections to the building permit, but the Higher Planning Council rejected them.

IDF Downs Hezbollah Drone in Israeli Airspace

The IDF said it shot down a drone belonging to Lebanon's [Hezbollah](#) militant group that entered Israeli airspace. In a brief statement, the military said it had monitored the aircraft throughout the incident and that at no point was there any danger to Israeli communities or forces. It said the IDF remained on "high alert and will not tolerate any violation of Israeli sovereignty," raising the possibility of an Israeli reprisal. The army also reported that the drone was downed through electronic means and the device is currently being probed to understand whether it was used for surveillance purposes or was armed. Tensions have been running high along Israel's northern frontier since July when Hezbollah accused the IDF of killing one of its operatives in an airstrike in Syria attributed to Israeli forces. [See also "US Hits Syria with New Sanctions, Targeting Oil and Spies" \(I24 News\)](#)

Pompeo Announces a Visit to Israel, Gulf Countries

Secretary of State Pompeo announced he will leave Friday for Paris and then head to Istanbul and the former Soviet republic of Georgia before visiting Jerusalem and three key Gulf Arab allies — Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar. The trip will discuss Trump's "historic efforts to forge peace and cooperation throughout the Middle East," Pompeo told reporters. Pompeo is expected to discuss raising further pressure on Iran in the remaining two months of the [Trump administration](#), which in 2018 bolted from a multinational denuclearization accord with Tehran and imposed punishing unilateral sanctions. Israel and Gulf Arabs have seen growing relations as they share the Trump administration's hostility to Iran. The trip will likely be awkward, as the seven-nation tour of US allies, have all congratulated President-elect Joe Biden despite Trump's refusal to concede. [See also "Netanyahu: I Stand for Israel, Not Republicans or Democrats" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Brother of Lebanon's PM Envisions Peace with Israel

The elder brother of Lebanese prime minister-designate, Saad Hariri, said Israel and Lebanon should settle their border disputes as part of steps toward a peace agreement. Israel and Lebanon launched US- and UN-mediated talks last month to resolve their disputed maritime border, which could allow both countries to explore and develop new gas fields in the Mediterranean following a number of big finds in recent years. While acknowledging the deep-seated disputes between Israel and Lebanon, Hariri said they needed to be resolved to achieve peace. He also called for resolving differences between the countries over their land border, particularly the Shebaa Farms. The Shebaa Farms, known in Hebrew as Mount Dov, and the adjacent Kfar Chouba hills are small patches of land captured by Israel from Syria during the Six Day War in 1967 and kept under Israel's control since. Lebanon maintains that the strip of land is its territory, though it was under Syrian control from the 1950s until it was captured in 1967 along with the Golan Heights. Hariri he warned his brother not to form a government with the Hezbollah terror group, saying such a move would hamper regional and international support for his country as it tries pull itself out of an economic and political crisis.

Gov't Restrictions on Religion Reach Highest Level Globally

In 2018, the global median level of government restrictions on religion such as laws, policies and actions by officials that impinge on religious beliefs and practices continued to climb, reaching an all-time high since Pew Research Research Center began tracking these trends in 2007. In its 11th report, Pew Research showed that even if the increase in government restrictions from 2017 to 2018 was relatively modest, it still contributed to a substantial rise in restrictions on religion over more than a decade, as well as a rise in the number of governments using force, such as detentions and physical abuse, to coerce religious groups. Pew Research Center combined its data on government restrictions and social hostilities involving religion with a classification of regime types, to discern whether there is a link between different models of government and levels of restrictions on religion. In other words, whether restrictions on religion tend to be more or less common in countries with full or partial democracies than in those with authoritarian regimes. The analysis found a strong link between authoritarianism and government restrictions on religion. While there are many exceptions to this pattern, authoritarian regimes are much more common among the countries with very high government restrictions on religion. Among countries with low government restrictions on religion, meanwhile, just 7% are authoritarian.

Iran Closed in on Atomic Bomb in Trump Era: Now Israel's Challenge in Biden Era

By Amos Yadlin

- **With the confirmation of Joe Biden's victory in the US presidential election, many voices began to emerge in Israel expressing concern that Israel's diplomatic-security interests would suffer as a result of the administration change scheduled to take place in January 2021. I do not agree that the Trump administration was the friendliest to ever stand alongside Israel. Yes, Jerusalem and Washington shared similar views about the current reality in the Middle East. The administration, headed by President Trump, moved the American embassy to Jerusalem, recognized Israeli sovereignty on the Golan Heights, blocked every anti-Israel resolution in international organizations and published a peace proposal that matched Israel's approach on every significant parameter.**
- **Also, this administration completed the victory over ISIS and killed its leader, al-Baghdadi, and in contrast to his predecessor attacked Syria after that country used chemical weapons against its own civilians. More than anything, there were two important strategic moves that contributed much to furthering Israel's goals: The first was furthering peace with the Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan (the word "peace", which had long disappeared from the Israeli lexicon, has returned as a guiding value after a quarter-century of stalemate). The second process - leading a tough, aggressive stance against Iran, most notably withdrawing from the nuclear deal, re-establishing painful sanctions and assassinating Qasem Soleimani, who led Iran's hegemony and reign of terror in the Middle East.**
- **At the same time, Trump, like Obama before him, led a strategy of disengaging the United States from the Middle East - and Russia and Iran stepped in to fill the vacuum. The strategy of "maximum pressure" on Iran didn't achieve its goals -- the collapse of the regime or a change in its policy and behavior. When Trump leaves the White House Iran will be closer to establishing military nuclear abilities than they were in 2017. Furthermore, Trump didn't really have a plan of operation deal with Iranian violations of the agreement and [Tehran's] progress towards the nuclear threshold. As Joe Biden prepares to take office, it is important to remember and remind that he has been a close friend of Israel for decades, with a terrific voting record vis-à-vis the State of Israel for more than 40 years. It is important to remember that in the United States of 2020 there is bi-partisan agreement, Republicans and Democrats alike, about the overriding principles guiding American policy in the Middle East: No more wars (after two decades of unsuccessful wars in Afghanistan and Iraq), energy independence that means the United States does not have to make "tribute" payments to the Arab states [by purchasing oil], preventing Iran from obtaining military nuclear capabilities, pushing for peace and normalization between countries of this region is an important principle, even as a means to obtaining the other goals.**

- **As Israelis it is natural that the most critical issue for us is the new president's anticipated attitude towards Israel -- but the Middle East is really not expected to occupy a high spot on President Biden's list of priorities. That list is likely to be topped by domestic issues. Furthermore, when the administration does address foreign policy, it will do so first and foremost with China and that country's global dominance. China is challenging the United States in every area: Business and economics, for the leadership of the global technology sector, military challenges--and more than anything and especially maintaining a differing view of the world order. Next on the new administration's to-do list will be to deal with an aggressive and nuclear North Korea. In addition, the administration will focus on restoring US relationships with allies and returning to the agreements the United States walked out on, beginning with the Paris Agreement on climate change.**
- **Only then, after addressing all these issues, will the new administration get around to dealing with the Middle East and Israel. And even then, one should not expect dramatic shift in policy. The administration will re-stress the United States commitment to the two-state solution—some people lean (or perhaps want) towards forgetting that the Trump plan, too, is predicated on the notion of the two state solution. Like Trump, President-elect Biden knows that the Palestinians are responsible for the ongoing stalemate of the peace process: The split between Fatah and Hamas, Hamas' refusal to disavow terror and to recognize Israel, the Palestinian Authority's extreme stance during negotiations, and the fact that to date that same Authority has never responded to the proposal tabled by then Secretary of State John Kerry in 2014--all these make clear to the new administration what difficulties there are associated with renewing the peace process.**
- **Biden will not move the US Embassy back to Tel Aviv, but he certainly could renew aid to the PA and to UNRWA and reopen the PLO office in Washington. The main issue facing the Biden administration in the Middle East is not the Palestinian issue—President Trump blocked Israel's annexation plans in the West Bank-- but rather the Iranian issue. The new Democratic administration is identified closely with the 2015 nuclear agreement, and Biden has announced that he intends to renew the diplomatic channel and re-join the agreement. At the same time there are many people in the Democratic camp who understand that it would be unwise and even impossible to return to the nuclear agreement [in its original form].**
- **The assumptions that formed the basis of that agreement have deteriorated: Iran has not become more moderate but rather the opposite--it has become more aggressive, the evidence obtained by the Mossad from Tehran's nuclear archives prove that Iran has both the knowledge and intention of developing nuclear weapons and in the original agreement there were violations on issues including oversight, research and development, especially what happens on the day after limits on Iran expire—the sunset clause. Furthermore, Iran violated the agreement: Today Tehran possesses 10 times more fissile material than is allowed by the agreement and more advanced centrifuges. That shortens the breakout time for a bomb.**

- **The critical and urgent challenge for the Israeli government vis-à-vis the new administration in Washington will be to convince the latter to insist on meaningful changes being inserted into the original nuclear agreement and to get them to understand that returning to the previous agreement would be a strategic mistake of the highest order. It is important to convince the new administration to use the leverage created by the Trump administration against Iran. But more than anything, the common strategic understandings that are based on shared values and interests must be clarified and reaffirmed in order to establish a strong foundation of trust between Israel and the incoming administration, trust that will allow us to make progress on the issues we agree on: Israeli security, stopping Iran from becoming a nuclear power and pushing forward with normalization and peace.**

A New Kind of Politics

By Lilach Sigan

- **MK Mansour Abbas has refused to say in advance whether he intends to vote in favor of a French bill [i.e., legislation that would postpone any prosecution of an incumbent prime minister until after his term in office has ended] and whether he would allow Netanyahu to weasel his way out of a trial. “I don’t want to say, so as not to be taken for granted,” said Abbas. On the one hand, it would be a joke if it were ultimately MKs from the Joint List, a party that is “not kosher” in Netanyahu’s book, that lent a hand to his plan to extricate himself—a plan that he has failed to see successfully through by any other means thus far. On the other hand, if Abbas meant that he didn’t want to repeat yet again that tired and worn-out mantra by the Arab MKs—that is a good thing.**
- **The meeting this week that was held by the Knesset committee for the eradication of violence in Arab society devolved, as usual, into a cacophonous screaming match that concealed the MKs’ utter disdain for the citizens’ wellbeing as well as their own inaction. When all is said and done, Arab society in Israel is yet another victim of the populist politics pursued by its leaders, who don’t really care about the public they represent. Specifically, the Arab Israelis are caught in a vise between politically-correct lies, on the one hand, and angry outbursts by the Bibi-ists, on the other, about how the Arabs are coming out “in droves.” They are stuck between the people who respond with outrage every time anyone dares to say that there is a problem of violence in Arab culture, and people who refuse to engage politically with the Joint List on any issue for fear of the stain that might leave on their public image.**
- **The problem is that statistically-speaking, there is a problem. As long as MKs, such as Ayman Odeh and Heba Yazbak, rant and rave instead of taking any sort of responsibility for the problem, they aren’t going to solve that problem. One needs only to agree to look at the numbers: the number of serious crimes committed in Arab society is twice the number in general Israeli society, even though the Arabs account for only one-fifth of the Israeli population. More than half of the women who are murdered every year in Israel are Arab women. According to an Institute for National Security Studies report, a majority of Arab citizens say they are afraid for their own safety even though they are law-abiding citizens. Alongside the culture of violence in that sector is a powerful trend of getting an education and becoming professionally integrated in important fields, such as medicine. The violence is perpetrated by only a small segment of that sector, but it is a deeply rooted segment that sows fear and impacts Arab society as a whole.**
- **There is not much new in all that. Politicians have been talking for two decades about the need to eradicate violence in Arab society. They have talking and talking but, as with so many other issues, they have been busy politicking and haven’t truly tried to solve the problem. One can certainly understand the criticism that the recent collaboration between MK Abbas and the Likud has elicited, especially given Netanyahu’s legal situation. But the only thing that the members of Joint List know how to do is to criticize others and to shrug off any responsibility that they might bear. All of which is to say that**

more criticism [by Abbas's fellow Joint List members], even if it is justified, merely sounds like a boring rehash of things we've heard before. More of the same.

- In principle, there is no reason why the Joint List shouldn't cooperate with the Israeli government. If it doesn't cooperate, its electoral success in the last elections is essentially rendered meaningless. Its insistence on shutting itself off, refraining to engage, being automatically adversarial and being isolationist is not going to bear any political fruit. Alternatively, if they choose to put their trust in Netanyahu's promises, they're likely to get just as far as everyone else before them who has ever believed Netanyahu's promises. They can't see the forest for all the worthless promises. The plan to eradicate violence that was presented at the committee meeting will be put to a cabinet vote in another two weeks' time.
- The question is whether it will be implemented and whether it will produce any practical results on the ground. Ayman Odeh said, and justly so, that the "prime minister has been making the same promises for 11 years already." MK Aida Touma-Sliman said that "Netanyahu is part of the problem, not part of the solution." That is probably true as well, but the members of the Joint List are also part of the problem and not part of the solution. That will continue to be the case for as long as they continue to sanctify [i.e., to prioritize] the Palestinians' rights instead of the day-to-day life of the Arab citizens of Israel. The Arab citizens deserve more from their publicly-elected representatives, be that in the form of a more pragmatic and conciliatory stance being adopted by the Joint List, or be that in the establishment of a new party that might give them hope. The yelling and the public provocations do nothing to advance solutions, and everyone is fed up with that kind of politics. Arabs and Jews alike.