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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

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I24 News

Yamina Surging in Tight Race Versus Likud for Premiership

Former acting Defense Minister Naftali Bennett's Yamina party would surge to 25 Knesset seats, just 3 behind the Likud, a new poll published by i24NEWS revealed. The right-wing politician has been breathing down Prime Minister [Netanyahu's](#) neck in recent months, as polls indicate growing dissatisfaction with the ruling party's conduct during the [coronavirus pandemic](#). Answering who is most fit to serve as the premier, 29% replied that Netanyahu should be the prime minister, with Bennett coming in second with 19%. And while the race between the Likud and Yamina tightens, the right-wing bloc surged to 70 mandates, leaving the center-left far behind with 33. Opposition Leader Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid party gained 15 seats with Blue & White retrieving some of its popularity loss with 12 seats. [See also "Gantz: If Netanyahu Doesn't Get a Grip, Knesset Will Disband for New Elections" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Gantz Warns: Public Will Blame Netanyahu for Elections

Alternate Prime Minister Benny Gantz issued a stern warning to Netanyahu about the consequences of not reaching a compromise on the state budget in a meeting of Gantz's Blue & White at the Knesset. Gantz said he instructed faction chairman Eitan Ginzburg to prepare relevant bills that advance equality and fighting corruption, which the party's MKs could help pass before elections would be initiated. Opposition leader Yair Lapid responded saying the bill that would prevent anyone under criminal indictment from serving as prime minister was written by him together with Gabi Ashkenazi of Blue & White. Meanwhile, United Torah Judaism leader announced that he would return to his former post as construction and housing minister. He left the post two months ago to protest a lockdown taking place during Jewish holidays. [See also "Gov't Not Enforcing Transparency Law on NGO Foreign Funding" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

I24 News

Israel Envoy to US: Mistake if Biden Reenters Nuclear Deal

Israel's Ambassador to the US Ron Dermer insisted that it would be a mistake for the incoming [Biden](#) administration to return to the Iran nuclear deal. In a joint statement released in tandem with the ambassadors of the UAE and Bahrain, Dermer urged the President-elect to examine "the reality in the Middle East" before making any decisions about the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. A more fruitful and positive direction for the administration, Dermer suggested, would be to continue to help broker deals between Israel and its Arab neighbors rather than a rapprochement with the Islamic Republic. Dermer is regarded as Netanyahu's closest adviser, and his remarks reflect his position on the matter, according Walla. [See also "Trump Asked for Options to Strike Iran Nuke Site in Last Days in Office" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Reuters

Qatar FM: Normalization Undermines Palestinian Statehood

Three Arab countries set aside hostilities with Israel to agree to formal relations in deals brokered by the Trump administration. Palestinian leaders have accused them of betrayal, while US and Israeli officials have said more Arab states could soon follow. “I think it’s better to have a united (Arab) front to put the interests of the Palestinians (first) to end the (Israeli) occupation,” Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed Al-Thani told the [Global Security Forum](#). He said division was not in the interest of concerted Arab efforts to get the Israelis to negotiate with the Palestinians and resolve the decades-long conflict between the sides. Qatar has been tipped by Israeli officials as among Arab and other Muslim-majority countries that could establish ties with Israel. Qatar also has Iran and Hamas and supports a two-state solution with East Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state. [See also “Israel, EU Discuss Possible Rail Link Between Mediterranean and Gulf States” \(Reuters\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

EU Aid to PA Used to Fund More Than Teacher Salaries

EU funding to the Palestinian Authority is indirectly used to help fund terrorist salaries, against the intentions of the EU, according to a Palestinian Media Watch (PMW) press release. The EU has helped with funding worth roughly hundreds of millions of Euros, which according to their statement go to "civil servants, mostly in the health and education sector in the West Bank," with further statements from the EU claiming that it knows exactly to which civil servants the funds are going to. Issues arise, according to the PMW, with the fact the PA has cut the salaries of all its civil servants, including those receiving their salaries from the EU, following a May 2020 announcement to no longer accept tax money transfers from Israel. PMW claims that since EU aid has not been reduced, but the salaries of PA teachers have been, the aid may be susceptible to manipulation by the PA, and that they may use it for any purpose. [See also “Right-Wing Activists Chase EU Envoy From Site of Planned East Jerusalem Project” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

PA Seen Losing Control of the Coronavirus Pandemic

The epidemiological situation in the West Bank has become extremely dangerous, say experts, who blame the lack of both a government strategy and a commitment by citizens. The Preventive Medicine unit at the Palestinian Authority Health Ministry announced that novel coronavirus infections were on the increase across societal sectors. Meanwhile, the flu season will soon arrive. The Central Command of Israel’s military imposed a month-long ban on Israeli citizens entering Area B of the West Bank, which the 1995 Oslo II Accord stipulates as being under PA civilian control and Israeli security control. It did so in an effort to stem a rise in cases among Israeli Arabs, many of whom visit the area. Israelis are already banned from entering Area A, which is under complete PA control. Area B comprises about 22% of the West Bank, and Area A, where the Palestinian cities are located, makes up about 18%. More than 72,900 Palestinians had been infected by the coronavirus. [See also “UNRWA Fears ‘Disaster’ in Gaza as Funding Runs Dry” \(Ynet News\)](#)

Ethiopian Rebel Forces Fire Missiles at Eritrean Capital

The leader of Ethiopia's rebellious Tigray region has confirmed firing missiles at neighboring Eritrea's capital and is threatening more, marking a huge escalation as the deadly fighting in northern Ethiopia between Tigray forces and the federal government spills across an international border. Tigray regional President, in a phone interview would not say how many missiles were fired at the city of Asmara but said it was the only city in Eritrea that was targeted. The brewing civil war in Ethiopia between a regional government that once dominated the country's ruling coalition, and a Nobel Peace Prize-winning prime minister whose sweeping reforms marginalized the Tigray region's power, could fracture a key US security ally and destabilize the strategic Horn of Africa. At least 3 rockets appeared to be aimed at the airport in Eritrea's capital, Asmara. Tigray accuses Eritrea of attacking it at the invitation of Ethiopia's government after the conflict erupted on November 4 with an attack by regional forces on a federal military base in the Tigray region. [See also "Ethiopia Conflict Claims 1st Jewish Victim; He'd Waited 24 Years for Israel Move" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

I24 News

US Missile Defense Agency Conducts ICBM Intercept Test

The United States Missile Defense Agency (MDA) recently announced that it conducted a successful Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) intercept test, over the ocean in northeastern Hawaii. The ICBM-representative target was launched from the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site, located on Kwajalein Atoll in the Republic of the Marshall Islands. In this developmental test, the destroyer used engage-on-remote capabilities through the Command and Control Battle Management Communications (C2BMC) network as part of a defense of Hawaii scenario. Once the system had received the tracking data, the destroyer launched an SM-3 Block IIA guided missile which eradicated the target. According to preliminary data, the test met the primary objective - namely, to demonstrate the SM-3 Block IIA's ability to successfully intercept and destroy an ICBM. This was the sixth flight test of an Aegis BMD-equipped vessel using the SM-3 Block IIA guided missile, one scheduled for earlier in the year had to be postponed due to personnel and equipment movement restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. To date, the program has cost approximately US\$1.8 billion, although there are fears that the final bill may dwarf this amount.

Israel Needs Hope, Not Fear in Pandemic Era

By Sever Plocker

- **When it comes to the coronavirus pandemic, two types of leadership exist - one based on fear and the other on hope. The former relies on strict adherence to regulations put in place to stop the spread of the disease, based on a fear of a massive death toll and hospitals collapsing from the surge in patients. The latter calls for obedience to regulations in order to limit the pandemic until a vaccine arrives, so that we can all return to normal as soon as possible. More than six months after the pandemic arrived in Israel, it seems that using fear and not hope as a motive is the wrong way to go.**
- **At first, people adhered to public health directives, but as time went on, obedience started to crumble once they realized there was no good news and nor they should expect any. "Where there is no vision, the people perish," the biblical saying goes. Selfishness takes over and a willingness to help for the greater good disappears.**
- **Let us run wild, the visionless people say and do. Leadership based on hope on the other hand does work, as nations who have successfully tackled coronavirus show. The governments of countries like South Korea and New Zealand told their citizenry in a clear manner: please be patient and stick to the rules because a vaccine is not far off. Patience will be rewarded in return. The current morbidity rate in Israel is reasonable, yet very fragile. The number of new daily cases continues to hover around at a relatively low 2% but remains so despite the fluctuating number of tests. There is not a high likelihood that we will bring the contagion rate down further, although it is not impossible. We must wait to see the impact of the rollback of further restrictions in the economy and the education system.**
- **If by mid-December the number of daily tests stands at around 60,000 with a positive rate of 1.5%, this means some 1,000 new cases every day. It would be an immense achievement if this rate can be maintained until the vaccine does arrive. But Israel is still gripped by fear, which is abundantly clear in the response to the news of a major development in the delivery of a vaccine.**
- **Both official and non-official talking heads have been racing to see who can describe the upcoming winter in the grimmest terms, thereby stamping out any spark of hope like it was the enemy of the people. Hope is not an adversary, but the very essence of life. Granted, overexaggerated enthusiasm about a possible vaccine must be put into proportion– but leaders would be making a huge public relations mistake if they ignore what could be a complete turnaround in the pandemic.**

Between Two Fronts

By Zalman Shoval

- The two names Nagorno and Karabakh most likely don't mean much to most Israelis, but Israel's name has now become connected to them. Nagorno-Karabakh is an enclave with an Armenian majority inside territory that historically and by international law belongs to neighboring Azerbaijan, and which Armenia occupied at the end of the 1980s when the Soviet Union unraveled. As long as the Soviet Union existed, conflicts between its different parts were of limited significance—in eastern Ukraine, for example, the fact that there was a Russian majority and a Polish majority in the west was of little importance, since after all, everything was under the Soviet Union's control. The same was true for Armenia and Azerbaijan. But when the Soviet puzzle began to come apart, all the hidden hatreds and national, ethnic and religious rivalries erupted like a boiling geyser.
- The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is one of the oldest, and with its religious and nationalist sensitivities, it resembles other unending conflicts in the Balkans. This specific case is about the demand of the Armenian majority in Nagorno-Karabakh to a right to self-determination versus Azerbaijan's legal rights. In previous battles, Armenia had the upper hand, and was able to not only conquer this enclave, but also extensive nearby territory to ensure its territorial contiguity with the Republic of Armenia. This time, the situation was reversed. Azerbaijan, which launched what it called a campaign to liberate its land and historic holy cities, was the victor, and the cease-fire that was reached with Russian mediation conferred on it a seal of approval. And just as in the last round, when hundreds of thousands of Azeris became refugees, this time, it was hundreds of thousands of Armenians.
- Some say that this war could have been averted and a diplomatic accommodation could have been reached had it not been for the arrogance of Armenia's leaders, but that assessment probably does not give enough weight to the extreme emotions and passions on both sides. For the time being, the war is over, but no one can be sure how long that will last. Violent struggles in the Caucasus have always had international repercussions; in the past, Britain was afraid that Russia's infiltration of the region was designed to open its own path to India, and now Turkey, which played an active role in the war on Azerbaijan's side, providing it with weapons, operational planning and apparently also personnel, did so not only because of its ethnic ties with Azerbaijan, but also in order to create for itself a convenient land crossing to the Caspian Sea and from there to central Asia. Russia did not lose out either, and its soldiers, as supervisors of the cease-fire, have now returned to the Caucasus.
- Israel, which has ties with both sides, did not play a direct role in the war, but its important common interests with Azerbaijan, which borders on Iran, in the financial sphere and oil as well as sales of various weapons, created a situation in which it unwillingly found itself on the same side as Turkey and, as expected, was roundly criticized by the Armenians.

- That was not the only dilemma: the Jewish people have a natural empathy for the Armenian people because of the genocide that was perpetrated against the Armenians and because of their yearning for independence, which has endured for generations. There used to be an Armenian community in Jerusalem that numbered in the tens of thousands. While Communist Russia moved the majority of them after World War II to the Soviet Armenian Republic, even today there remain important offshoots, who are Israeli citizens. Israel will no doubt make every effort to restore its relationship with Armenia to its former state, which is also in Armenia's best interests.
- In the Netanyahu era, the world views Israel as a "regional power," and this fact also played a role in the Emirates' decision to forge a relationship with Israel in the face of their shared Iranian threat (a decision that has been reinforced by Biden's victory in the elections). But sometimes, along with the advantages, there are also disadvantages, as in the case of Azerbaijan and Turkey. In the future, if it heats up, it may also come to the fore in a fight between Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia—all of which are Israel's partners—over the waters of the Nile River.
- Nagorno-Karabakh is not here, but the Gaza Strip is, and just as the Armenians in that enclave wished to unite with their homeland, Gaza will also not want to be cut off from the Palestinian majority forever; all the solutions, ostensibly, that have been raised to resolve that are either impractical or impossible for various reasons, and since the ideas of a fenced overhead or underground road (which also appears in Trump's plan) are problematic from the engineering and monetary aspect, but mainly from the security aspect, the future, at best, holds a separate Gazan autonomy, one that is demilitarized and restricted from the diplomatic aspect, but which has been economically rehabilitated. In the worst case, the unending security clashes will continue. Israel, of course, must conduct itself in such a manner that a scenario like that of Nagorno-Karabakh is not replicated here.