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## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, November 18*

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# News Excerpts

November 18, 2020

Arutz Sheva

## **Netanyahu Attacks Bennett: I Don't Know if He's Left or Right**

Prime Minister Netanyahu launched a scathing attack during a radio interview on Yamina chairman [Naftali Bennett](#). "I do not know if Bennett is right-wing or left-wing. It depends on what day you ask. There are two parties there. Bennett voted for Lapid for prime minister. He voted with the Joint List. Asked if [Benny Gantz](#) would be prime minister, Netanyahu replied, "Who knows? If they will give - they will receive. In the meantime, we have a government within a government. To a large extent, this will determine the continuation of the government." Later in the interview, Netanyahu clarified, "I will not rely on the joint list because they are supporters of terrorism. There is a struggle in Arab society between those who are Islamists who want to take us back to the Middle Ages and those who want to integrate." [See also "High Court to Netanyahu, gov't: 30 days to respond on appointments, PM powers" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Ynet News

## **Netanyahu and Rivlin Speak to Biden**

President Reuven Rivlin and Prime Minister Netanyahu spoke with President-elect Joe Biden. The phone conversation between Biden and Netanyahu was reportedly "warm," according to a statement from the Prime Minister's Office, with the latter reiterating his "deep commitment to Israel and its security." The premier said that the "special bond between Israel and the US is the basis for Israel's security and its policies." The two agreed to meet soon in order to discuss the many issues on the agenda and stressed the need to "continue strengthening the strong alliance between the US and Israel." Rivlin also spoke with Biden to congratulate him on his victory. Rivlin invited Biden to his residence in Jerusalem, saying that "I was happy to welcome you to Jerusalem as vice president, and I would be happy to welcome you here when you come to Jerusalem as president." [See also "Netanyahu Hits Stage Five of Grieving Trump: Accepting Biden" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

I24 News

## **PA Says It's Resuming Security Coordination with Israel**

The Palestinian Authority said it was resuming the security cooperation with Israel in the West Bank, after "political contacts" by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. The PA halted the coordination earlier this year, when Israel was planning to extend its sovereignty to Jewish communities in the West Bank, a plan that didn't materialize. Israel later put its annexation plans on hold in return for a US-brokered agreement to normalize ties with the UAE. "In the light of Mahmud Abbas's international contacts and given the written and verbal commitments we have received from the Israelis, we will resume relations where they were before May 19, 2020," the PA's Civil Affairs Minister said. Hamas condemned the decision, saying it was compromising joint Palestinian efforts to resist President Trump's peace plan.

## **Jordanian King Heads to UAE for Trilateral Summit**

King Abdullah II will travel to the UAE for a meeting with the Bahraini king and the Emirati crown prince, according to Jordanian state media. The meeting will come as two Bahraini ministers are expected to make the first official visit to Israel from the Gulf kingdom to take part in a [trilateral meeting](#) in Jerusalem with Israeli and US officials. The meeting is expected to be attended by Netanyahu, Sec. of State Pompeo, and Bahraini FM Abdullatif Al-Zayani. Jordan and Israel have been at peace since 1994 and have full diplomatic relations. Despite Jordan's majority-Palestinian population, the two governments cooperate closely on security and economic issues. This will be the first official visit by King Abdullah to the UAE since it decided to normalize ties with Israel. While the king has not opposed the accords, the Jordanian government has yet to fully embrace them. [See also "Emiratis Unperturbed by Fatwa Banning Them from Prayers on Temple Mount" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

### Al-Monitor

## **Israelis Try Resettling WB Settlement Evacuated in 2005**

Twenty Israeli families — parents, children and young couples — entered the evacuated settlement of Sa-Nur in the northern West Bank during the night. The group did not coordinate its move with the military, and Israel Defense Forces arrived later to inform them that they were trespassing. The Sa-Nur settlement was evacuated and demolished in 2005, alongside 3 other settlements in the northern West Bank — Homesh, Gamin and Kadim. The overall evacuation was part of the Gaza disengagement plan championed by then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. The Disengagement Plan Implementation Law, adopted at the time by the Knesset to enable the unilateral Israeli move, makes the presence of Israeli civilians on the ruins of the four settlements [illegal](#). Still, ever since the disengagement, families who were evacuated together with other right-wing activists have been campaigning for resettling and have even attempted to come back there on several occasions. [See also "With Trump on Way Out, Netanyahu Nails Together Settlement Legacy" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

### Jerusalem Post

## **Erdan Shows UNSC Map of Hezbollah Activity**

Israel's Ambassador to the UN Gilad Erdan submitted an official letter to the UN Security Council (UNSC) demanding it take immediate action against Hezbollah's military buildup and continued activity in southern Lebanon. Erdan's appeal to the UNSC follows a quarterly report recently submitted by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres that focuses on the implementation of UN Resolution 1701, which came into effect during the 2006 Second Lebanon War, and was meant to resolve the conflict. One of the resolution's original conditions was "the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon, so that, pursuant to the Lebanese cabinet decision of July 27, 2006, there will be no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than that of the Lebanese state." Guterres' report, however, pointed at severe violations of that resolution by Hezbollah, which, according to the report, has been advancing military buildup in southern Lebanon - a claim that has been made by IDF officials on multiple occasions.

## **IDF Launches Airstrikes Against Iranian Targets in Syria**

The IDF attacked Iranian and Syrian targets in Syria in response to explosives troops uncovered on Israel's border with Syria. There were no immediate reports of casualties. The IDF has launched hundreds of strikes in Syria since the start of the civil war in 2011, but rarely acknowledges the attacks. The army explicitly claiming responsibility for the strikes on Iranian forces immediately after they took place, and providing details about the targets, was highly irregular, if not unprecedented. The IDF did not specify where the airstrikes took place, but shortly before the army released its statement, Syrian state media reported attacks in the area of the capital of Damascus. The SANA state news agency said Syrian air defenses intercepted "Israeli aggression" in the skies over Damascus. Syrian war analysts generally dismiss the military's regular claims of interceptions as false, empty boasts. [See also "Gantz Says Syria Accountable for Explosives Found in Israel's North" \(I24 News\)](#)

## **Russia to Establish Naval Base in Sudan**

Russia plans to establish a military base on Sudan's Red Sea coast to serve as a logistics center for the Russian navy, according to a draft agreement between Moscow and Khartoum signed by Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin. The agreement states that Sudan will provide a land plot for the Russian base free of charge for a period of 25 years. It will automatically renew for subsequent 10-year periods. To terminate the deal, one of the parties must notify the other party of its intention at least one year before the expiration of the next period. While the base's capacity will be capped at four ships at a time, nuclear-powered ships are permitted to dock, thus significantly increasing the combat capability of the Russian navy in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. The number of military personnel permanently staying at this facility should not exceed 300 people, according to the agreement. The agreement to establish a Russian military facility in Sudan has boosted the positive dynamics in relations between the two countries and confirmed Russian influence in Sudan.

## **The Right Step**

By Ben-Dror Yemini

- **There's been no security coordination between Israel and the Palestinian Authority for months. That hasn't produced a disaster and a new wave of terror, but our security officials haven't liked the situation. We learned yesterday that coordination has been reestablished. That's a good thing. There are more than enough unsolvable issues with the Palestinians; we don't need to add to that list. Europe is still in the picture, with its standard approach to the conflict. Typically, they are unhelpful. The EU and most of the countries of Western Europe adopt the Palestinian position. Their massive contributions to Palestinian and Israeli NGOs, all of which are hostile to Israel, only serve to pour oil on the fire. Europe could play a positive, serious role by building bridges to peace, but they haven't. To the contrary.**
- **This time, something else happened. The EU pressed the PA to resume coordination, and even leveled a threat to cut aid if the PA complained about collapsing but refused to accept the tax levies that Israel collects on [the PA's] behalf. We're talking about \$750M, a significant sum, being held by the [Israeli] Finance Ministry. Abu Mazen punished the Palestinians because Israel has insisted, correctly, on withholding money the PA gives to terrorists and their families for carrying out terror attacks against Israel. The Defense Ministry was also in the picture. The result was a resumption of money transfers, minus the withholdings for terror payments, and a resumption of security coordination.**
- **It's a partial solution. The Palestinian problem has been and remains an open wound, despite breakthroughs with three Arab countries. It's not only about the conflict with Israel. In recent years the Palestinians have even managed to turn the moderate Arab states, which have always supported them, into enemies. Arafat's support for Saddam Hussein led to the first break. Arab countries allowed their anger over that to simmer but continued to support [the Palestinians]. It didn't help. Most of the Arab countries supported the parameters that Clinton proposed in 2000, but the Palestinians joined the opposition front. Iran became the principal threat to Middle East stability, together with Erdogan's Turkey, which has become a flashpoint for the Muslim Brotherhood. And which side did the Palestinians choose to join? The Iranian-Islamist-Turkish axis.**
- **So while security cooperation is important in-and-of-itself, it only solves a small headache. The process itself continues. With all due respect to the upcoming Biden administration, there is no chance they're going to present a plan that will satisfy the Palestinians. After all, Biden was the vice-president when John Kerry presented the Palestinians with a deal they couldn't refuse. Susan Rice was also there. Both know the Palestinians refused. The fact that there is no chance at all for a deal is precisely the reason that small steps like a resumption of security coordination are important. There is certainly no need for massive construction projects outside the settlement blocs, about which there is no disagreement. Until the circumstances change, there is no need to make things worse.**

## **Who Knows One**

By Sima Kadmon

- The alternating premiership arrangement is supposed to be carried out in exactly one year from today. When Netanyahu was asked whether Gantz was going to be prime minister, he answered without hesitation: Who knows? The question mark was superfluous. There aren't any question marks with Netanyahu. "Who knows" was a smug and arrogant answer that expressed Netanyahu's contempt for the person with whom he reached a signed and sealed agreement to hand over the reins of power. Who knows? You do, Mr. prime minister. You know. It's entirely up to you. You expressed such profound disdain in the next sentence that you uttered—if they give they'll get; if they don't give they won't get—a sentence [which boils to a catchy four words in Hebrew] that once upon a time you said in reference to the Palestinians, and yesterday, with absolutely no shame at all, you said it in reference to Gantz.
- On the other side of the divide, when Gantz gets asked the same question, he answers with the same modesty, insecurity and uncertainty that has characterized him ever since he formed a government in partnership with Netanyahu: I think that needs to happen. The government was formed just six months ago and we're already galloping towards its dissolution. Ostensibly, nothing has changed. Another week went by without any agreements and without a state budget. But when the days go by and nothing happens, that propels us towards a new election. And that is precisely the atmosphere now in the cabinet, in the Knesset and in the Likud: everyone there feels that it is becoming increasingly likely that elections are going to be held and they have all shifted gears accordingly. One need only look at the various online Likud groups to see that everyone there is focused on the next internal party election. And Netanyahu—he's like a pilot who is waiting to drop the bomb. He is flying high overhead, with one hand on the button, and is waiting for the right moment. It is clear to everyone that unless he stops that process and reaches understandings about the state budget, we are going to continue to move in the direction of new elections.
- Today the Knesset plenum is scheduled to discuss and vote on a proposed amendment to Basic Law: Government. The amendment, if approved, would stop the term of any prime minister, minister or deputy minister the moment they are indicted, and that amendment will become applicable as of the next Knesset. Opposition Chairman Yair Lapid, who introduced the proposed amendment, has pledged not to yank it from the floor at the last moment. He said that Blue and White has a clear vested interest in voting in favor of the bill, because it will then force Netanyahu to honor the alternating premiership arrangement and will avert early elections. But Lapid knows that that isn't going to happen. The amendment won't be approved, and not because of Blue and White. The bill does not have enough support even within the opposition. Yamina Chairman Naftali Bennett has said he does not support legislation in that vein because he believes that no civil servant—in the current case, the attorney general—should have the power to oust an elected prime minister from office.

- This is only the latest in a string of attempts by the opposition leader to paint Blue and White into a corner, to challenge it with a vote on issues that the party ostensibly supports. But Blue and White has enough problems even without Lapid's pressure. The cracks within the party are widening, and it is hard to tell anymore who's against whom. The disagreement within Blue and White isn't only between the moderates and the militants—who wants to compromise and who wants to end the partnership with the Likud. It is also between Gantz's camp and the rest of the party. Informed political sources said an increasing number of Blue and White members are convinced that Gantz either won't run if new elections are called or he'll step down in mid-campaign. They say that that is the reason that Ashkenazi and Nissenkorn have been pushing for elections. Ashkenazi—because he would prefer to be the leader of a party with eight MKs over being number two in a party with ten or twelve MKs. Nissenkorn—because he believes that his public standing has improved and that he is currently at peak popularity.
- Members of Gantz's camp—Hod Betzer (who almost became the director general of the Alternate Prime Minister's Office), Chili Tropper and Omer Yankelevich—realize that if Gantz goes they will lose standing in the party and may be forced out. They have an interest in keeping the current government alive. Each one and his assessment as to where he stands; each one and his own personal interests. Regarding the recent reports about talks that have been held between Blue and White and the Likud over the budget, those talks appear to be an attempt by Netanyahu to play for time more than anything else. His goal is to drag things out until March or April, in hope that by that point vaccines will begin to arrive, the economy will begin to bounce back and his polling numbers might begin to improve as well. Gantz, by all signs, has decided to cede to Netanyahu complete control over the timing of next elections. Gantz has made one threat followed by another, but none of that appears to be making the smallest impression on Netanyahu. He enjoys seeing Gantz flail about, deliberate and back down time and again. Empty threats—that is all Netanyahu can see coming from Gantz, who threatens, but at the same time broadcasts his own weakness.
- From time to time, intoxicated by his own power, Netanyahu condescends to give Gantz a glimmer of hope. This week he supposedly applied himself to the security detail that is to be provided to the alternate prime minister, his wife and children. Netanyahu acted as if he was looking into the security that he and his family would receive once Gantz replaced him as prime minister. A signal of that kind might be enough to push back Gantz's deadline by another two weeks. If that's what Netanyahu is focused on, that must mean that he's preparing himself for the alternate prime minister arrangement. But that is exactly like the questionable deal that was concocted last week between the Likud and Blue and White; a deal that was quickly removed from the agenda, in which a new Finance Ministry accountant general would be appointed in exchange for Hod Betzer's formal appointment as director general of the Alternate Prime Minister's Office. General Douglas McArthur, who commanded the Allied forces in World War Two, once said that old soldiers never die, they just fade away. Let's hope that that isn't Gantz's fate.