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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

November 9, 2020

I24 News

Gantz, Bennett Hold Talks on New Israeli Elections

Defense Minister and Alternate Prime Minister Benny Gantz met with right-wing [Yamina](#) party leader Naftali Bennett, according to KAN. The two met to discuss the prospect of dismantling the current ruling coalition and setting off a new election. Lawmakers with the Gantz-led Blue & White party also recently held talks with opposition head Yair Lapid, chief of the Yesh Atid-Telem alliance. [The report](#) comes as Channel 12 revealed its latest poll, giving Netanyahu's Likud 28 seats on the 120-member Knesset if an election was to be held. Yamina would come in second with 22 seats, followed by Yesh Atid-Telem with 17 and the predominantly Arab Joint List with 13. Blue & White would find itself holding only 11 seats, followed by the ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism and Shas, both commanding 8 votes, and Yisrael Beiteinu with 7 seats.

Jerusalem Post

Blue & White Proposes Salary Freeze Bill Despite Likud Bill

MK Eitan Ginzburg (Blue & White), chairman of the Knesset House Committee, proposed a bill to freeze an increase in the salaries of MKs that is expected to occur in January 2021, despite the existence of a bill already proposed by the Likud that would do the same but goes even farther, cutting gov't salaries by 10%. Ginzburg's announcement comes after Finance Minister Israel Katz (Likud) proposed a bill that would stop the planned salary increase and implement a 10% cut in the salaries of members of the gov't, including MKs, ministers, the prime minister, judges, and the president. The proposal was unanimously approved by the gov't. Blue & White opposed Katz's bill, saying that it was the initial proposer of the bill, but that it is now going against the bill being proposed by the Likud due to Likud action against Blue & White proposals. [See also "Yamina MK Proposes Shortening Election Period to 45 Days" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Times of Israel

After Hours of Silence, Netanyahu Congratulates Biden

After a conspicuously long hiatus, Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Rivlin issued statements congratulating Joe Biden after his US election win. Analysts pointed out that in his tweets and subsequent remarks to the cabinet, Netanyahu did not address Biden as "president-elect" and did not explicitly state that the former vice president had won the elections. The fact that Netanyahu and Rivlin took 12 hours after all major American networks projected that Biden had beaten Trump — and long after most world leaders had done so — was a source of concern for some. Opposition leader Yair Lapid was the first Israeli politician to congratulate Biden on, said it was "cowardly and shameful" that the country's top leadership remained silent. Defense Minister Benny Gantz became the first senior Israeli leader to congratulate Biden. [See also "As Trump Era Ends, Israel Must Tread Carefully" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Israel to Reach Out to Biden Over Long-Term Military Aid

Israel plans to reach out to President-elect Biden's administration to begin discussing the formulation of a new long-term military aid plan for the IDF. A new multibillion-dollar plan would be an issue that Israel will want to begin working on as soon as possible to ensure it is approved and implemented before the next administration leaves office and the current aid program expires in 2027, a top defense official said. The US currently provides Israel with \$3.8b as part of a \$38b military aid program signed in 2016 shortly before president Obama left office. While the 2016 package constituted the most US military aid given to any country, it entailed concessions by Israel, which had to commit not to seek additional funds from Congress beyond what was guaranteed in the package. In addition, the agreement phased out a special arrangement that had allowed Israel to spend part of the aid money on its own defense industry instead of on American-made weapons. [See also "Biden Could Differ with Netanyahu on Iran and Settlements" \(Reuters\)](#)

Abbas Lauds Biden, Demands Return of Embassy to Tel Aviv

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas called on President-elect Joe Biden to "strengthen" relations between the [Palestinians](#) and Washington, which collapsed during President Trump's term. Palestinian envoy to the UK Hussam Zomlot lauded what he deemed "historic & inspiring elections". Zomlot was the Palestine Liberation Organization's envoy to Washington until the Trump administration closed the diplomatic mission. An unnamed official in Abbas's office was quoted by [Israel Hayom](#) as saying Ramallah has sent Biden messages that the PA would be willing to resume US-brokered peace negotiations with Israel, but only from the point where they were halted in 2016. The official added that Abbas will demand that Biden immediately return the US Embassy to Tel Aviv, reversing a move Trump made in 2018, and undo Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. [See also "Biden Realizes the Palestinian Authority's Importance to Israel, but Expectations Remain Low" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Saudi Arabia Finally Congratulates Biden on His Win

Saudi Arabia finally congratulated Joe Biden after he defeated Trump, who had close personal ties with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The former vice president pledged in his campaign to reassess ties with the kingdom, demanding more accountability over the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Riyadh's Istanbul consulate and calling for an end to US support for the Yemen war. As other Arab states raced to applaud the Democrat challenger, the kingdom's de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman remained silent on the US vote even as he sent warm words to the president of Tanzania on his re-election. A Saudi political source played down the risk of a falling out between the kingdom and the United States, pointing to Riyadh's historic ties with Washington. [See also "Israeli Expert: Biden Could Block F-35 Sale to UAE Over Iran Fears" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Pompeo to Visit Israel as US Looks to Step up Iran Sanctions

Secretary of State Pompeo is expected to visit Israel on November 18, also possibly visiting other states in the region, [Axios](#) reported. The Trump administration is planning to unleash a flurry of sanctions targeting Iran. According to the report, the White House developed, with the help of the Israeli security establishment, a long list of Iranian targets for new restrictions. The plan is to slap new restrictions every week before the inauguration of the next US president in January 20, when president-elect Joe Biden could take over the White House. The restrictions will reportedly not be linked with Iran's nuclear program, as those are seen as being more likely to be dismantled by Biden. Instead, the new sanctions will take aim at Iran's efforts to support its regional terrorist proxies and build up its ballistic missile arsenal, as well as its breaches of human rights. Netanyahu met with the US Special Representative for Iran Elliott Abrams who arrived for consultations on the plan. Abrams will meet with Defense Minister Benny Gantz and Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi. After that, he will also reportedly visit Saudi Arabia and the UAE. [See also "Annexation, Iran Sanctions, Weapons? What Israel May Ask of Trump as He Leaves" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Shifting Terrorist Tactics Slow Development in North Sinai

Egypt is rolling out ambitious development projects in north Sinai adjoining the Suez Canal, Israel and Gaza, but pockets of instability persist despite an intensified military campaign. Large scale assaults on military and gov't positions have subsided but terrorists have shifted tactics, staging more individual attacks, deploying snipers and planting explosives, security sources and analysts say. Their ability to temporarily overrun villages near in north-west Sinai this summer shows security remains fragile, while poverty and neglect have not been fully addressed, they say. While southern Sinai is home to the highly secured Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh and other tourist spots, much of the rugged peninsula is thinly populated and underdeveloped. An Islamist insurgency spread in northern Sinai after the military overthrew President Mohamed Mursi of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013. Hundreds of policemen and soldiers, and more than 1,000 civilians have died, according to official statements. Sinai Province, a terrorist group loyal to Islamic State (IS), has drawn support from local Bedouins complaining of marginalization, a charge the gov't denies. [See also "Shin Bet Reveals Hamas Efforts to Recruit Minors for West Bank Attacks" \(I24 News\)](#)

Return of the Nuclear Deal

By Alex Fishman

- **The restoration of the nuclear agreements between the United States and Iran is a matter of when, not if. From unofficial talks recently between Joe Biden’s foreign policy and defense team and senior Israeli officials, it is clear that the incoming administration is already formulating a plan to renew talks with Iran. Furthermore, presenting the United States’ ideas for an agreement and renewing talks with Iran is a high priority. The American team is comprised of Anthony Blinken, Biden’s national security advisor, Jack Sullivan, who coordinates foreign policy and Michèle Flournoy, who coordinates the team dealing with security. Official Israel is not yet in the picture.**
- **The strategy drafted by the team is to conduct talks with the Iranians in two stages, and on two separate channels. In the first stage—from the moment Biden assumes office and before Iran’s presidential election in June 2021. The American assessment is that it will be impossible to reach a meaningful deal before the election of a new president in Iran. Therefore, the goal of the first stage is to reach understandings with the Iranians about freezing the situation, with respect to both the proliferation of ballistic weapons and Iranian involvement in the region. On the second track: Freezing activity on the military nuclear program. In exchange, the Americans are willing to concede the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration. When a new president is elected in Iran, the Americans plan to hold negotiations on a permanent agreement that will cover two areas: The nuclear issue and the regional issue. The United States is preparing to close “holes” in the original 2015 agreement. The second stage could last a long time, during which the sanctions would remain in place.**
- **The American plan could be a source of disagreement between Defense Minister Benny Gantz and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu believes there is no alternative to sanctions—until Iran gives up its nuclear infrastructure. Gantz’s approach is not to rule out the American attempt out of hand but rather that any agreement must include elements that would bring an end not only to the development of nuclear weapons, but also the distribution of ballistic weapons around the region, including the precision-guided missiles plants in Lebanon and a stop to Iranian involvement in anti-Israel terrorism. Defense officials believe an agreement with Iran that includes elements that Israel asks for would act as a restraining force to the region’s stampede towards war in Lebanon. The current pace of development of precision-guided missiles in Lebanese plants could require Israel to attack these weapon systems as early as this year. The defense minister has instructed the army to prepare for a situation that deteriorates into a clash on the Lebanese front. The large military drill the IDF conducted in the north was a general dress rehearsal for such a clash. Security officials in Israel say that a good deal with Iran that ensures the halt of the Iranian nuclear weapons program and halts the development of precision-guided missiles in Lebanon for the next 15 years would be preferable to an armed clash that would push off the problem by only a few years.**

This is a Sickbed

By Sarit Rosenblum

- Prof. Itamar Grotto's resignation from the Health Ministry came as no surprise to anyone who knew him. For several months Grotto has wanted to end his career at the ministry and to begin something new. Something far from the bad blood that typified working under the previous director general, Mosher Bar Siman Tov and his right hand woman Siegal Sadetsky; far from the unending public criticism over the handling of the coronavirus crisis; far from the unending clashes with politicians and various self-interested parties. Grotto's resignation, the latest in a series of resignations by talented and devoted directors who left the ministry in the last few months, attests to the Sisyphean work that has been the lot of this small and professional ministry ever since the coronavirus burst into our lives.
- They work night and day trying to carry out the huge task that has been given them: to prepare the healthcare establishment to treat thousands of people in serious condition, to recruit medical and nursing personnel, to obtain budgets and to explain to the public, over and over again, how critical its role is in this war. And mainly—to try to reduce the immense gap between what it needs and what it has within just a few weeks.
- These devoted civil servants, most of whom we don't know, have worked day and night for nine months. Even if the result is not always satisfactory, none of them has had a private life during this time. This crisis has affected their families, their partners and their children. In many cases it has affected their health. They work under actual life-threatening conditions in a crucial war, without enough soldiers, for the sake of a single sacred goal: saving human lives. But their hard work is not appreciated. Instead, they are criticized, they are called functionaries and their opinion is ignored as are their professional decisions. Nobody has a kind word to say about them or to them. While they work under impossible conditions to try and reduce the damage caused by the coronavirus, the arrows continue to be directed at them all the time. It is no wonder that it is hard for them to endure.
- Grotto, whose name very few people had heard before the pandemic, has much to his credit in Israel's public health service. He promoted the cannabis reform, he helped put a successful end to the polio crisis, he acted to have food labeled. Even though he admitted about himself that he has a short fuse, he was the person whom people turned to at times of conflict to try and reach compromise and bridge gaps. No less important: he helped the people who turned to him in their distress, even when their names were not Teddy Sagi. He did all that with integrity, affably and modestly. Without fanfare. He gave his soul, he believed with his entire being in the justice of the ministry's path and identified with it. But his soul became burned by all the ego, the aggression and the intrigues that surrounded him in the last few months. The healthcare system was unable to protect him, simply because it doesn't care enough about holding onto good people.

- **His departure creates another void in the Health Ministry's management at a time in which all the troops are needed. We can guess that nobody will be in any rush to replace him. Any professional with suitable alternatives will be in no hurry to work in this small and deprived ministry, certainly not in the middle of a pandemic. Even those who were appointed in the course of the greatest health crisis the world has known in the last 100 years was brought in by coercion, mainly because it was impossible to recruit more attractive candidates. Without Grotto and the other good professionals who left before him, the Health Ministry is a weak ministry and more controllable. It will now be easier for the politicians to do what they want with it. When that happens, there will be one less person to shout out.**