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## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, December 30*

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- S&P: Rating Could Depend on Political Developments
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- Netanyahu Said to Again Postpone Trip to UAE, Bahrain
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# News Excerpts

December 30, 2020

Times of Israel

## **In Blow to Gantz, Nissenkorn Joins Huldai's New Party**

Justice Minister Avi Nissenkorn announced he is joining Mayor [Ron Huldai's](#) new party, [the Israelis](#), in a major blow to Defense Minister Benny Gantz's moribund Blue & White party ahead of Knesset elections in March. A statement from Huldai said Nissenkorn informed Gantz of the move. Gantz had been expected to fire the minister over his decision to jump ship. The announcement from Nissenkorn came hours before Gantz was to give a press conference, in which he was expected to declare he'll [head](#) Blue & White in the elections despite the party's [plummeting](#) poll numbers and internal grumbling over his leadership. Nissenkorn joined a growing list of incumbent Blue & White lawmakers who won't run with the party in the upcoming elections. [See also "The Masochism of the Israeli Center-Left" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

## **S&P: Rating Could Depend on Political Developments**

Maxim Rybnikov, director of S&P's Europe, Middle East and Africa sovereign ratings team, said that the agency would be "closely monitoring the situation in the run-up to and aftermath of the planned general election, assessing the potential impact on our ratings. The firm estimates the Israel's net government debt will increase to 73% of gross domestic product by the end of 2020 as it attempts to counter the impact of the COVID-19. At the same time, it sees public debt stabilizing at close to 77% of GDP in 2022-2023 and government deficits declining to 4% over the same period. These figures are based on the assumption that the current political stalemate will be resolved. Economic policy experts have also warned that Israel's political volatility and failure to pass an annual budget could result in heightened poverty rates and delay in major infrastructure projects. [See also "Health Basket Budget Set at \\$171m" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Times of Israel

## **Lieberman Sets Sights on Becoming Next Finance Minister**

Yisrael Beytenu leader Avigdor Lieberman said he is aiming to become Israel's next finance minister and ruled out a coalition with Prime Minister [Netanyahu's](#) Likud or his ultra-Orthodox allies, but not the left-wing Meretz. Speaking to Channel 12, Lieberman, a former foreign and defense minister, asserted that although "in terms of experience, ability and data" he is more suitable than any other candidate to be prime minister, he would like to tackle the "wild challenge" of Israel's finances. Yisrael Beytenu will also seek the interior, immigration, and health portfolios, he said. Lieberman, a right-wing hawk, said he doesn't rule out sitting with Meretz, a leftist party that shares some common views on issues of religion and state. The two parties are entirely at odds, however, on issues relating to the Palestinians and Arab Israelis. [See also "The Era of the Right-Wing Bloc is Over" \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

## **At Least One Syrian Killed After Israeli Strike Near Damascus**

Syrian air defenses intercepted Israeli targets above Damascus, Syrian state media SANA reported, killing at least **one** Syrian. According to a military source, rockets from the northern Galilee in Israel attacked Syria at 1:30 am, targeting the air defenses near Damascus. The source said one soldier was "martyred" and three others injured in the attack, which also caused some material damage. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based group, Israel also struck Hezbollah positions near Zabadani, a town close to the Lebanese border. Israel rarely comments on alleged attacks in Syria, although it has said it will respond to Iran-backed fighters deployed in the country. Israel allegedly attacked Iran-backed militias in the northwestern part Syria, early Christmas Day. These attacks left at least six fighters dead, monitor groups reported. [See also "Israeli, American Submarine Activity Suggests Show of Force Against Iran" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Times of Israel

## **Netanyahu Said to Again Postpone Trip to UAE, Bahrain**

Prime Minister Netanyahu's trip to the UAE and Bahrain — the first announced official visit to the two Gulf Arab states by an Israeli prime minister — has again been postponed, according to a report. Citing Israeli officials, the report by the Walla news said the recent delay is due to the ongoing national lockdown ordered in Israel to curb coronavirus infections. It is the second time in the past month that Netanyahu's Gulf tour has been delayed. Netanyahu had been scheduled to visit the two countries in the first week of January, according to Walla. It did not say whether a new date has been set. The Israeli leader is thought to have visited various Gulf capitals in secret as the countries maintained an under-the-radar relationship only brought into the open amid a flurry of diplomatic activity over the last several months. In 2018, he visited Muscat, but only confirmed the visit after the fact. [See also "Gaza's Drill – Preparation for War or a PR Stunt?" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Ha'aretz

## **E. Jerusalem Palestinians Petition Absentee Property**

Palestinians in east Jerusalem have filed a petition with Israel's High Court, demanding that the arm of the Israeli government responsible for property left behind after the 1947 war recognize their rights as tenants, and cease secretly cooperating with settlers' organizations. The petition was submitted by attorneys Adi Lustigman and Tamir Blank on behalf of residents of the Um Haroun neighborhood in Sheikh Jarrah and Ir Amim, an Israeli non-profit that promotes equality between Israelis and Palestinians in Jerusalem. It asks that the Custodian for Absentees' Property be compelled to publish organized and equitable procedures for the management, sale and leasing of its properties in east Jerusalem. About 600 Palestinian families live in buildings managed by the custodian. For the most part, these properties belonged to Jews before 1948. By law, these assets remain in the hands of the Jewish owners or of the custodian, if its owners are unknown. On the other hand, assets that were under Palestinian ownership before 1948 were automatically transferred to the state by dint of the Absentees' Property Law. [See also "Buying Hanukkah Candles in Ramallah" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

## **US Approves Sale of 3,000 Guided Missiles to Saudi Arabia**

The US State Department announced it had approved a possible sale of 3,000 precision guided bombs to [Saudi Arabia](#), worth some \$290 billion, according to a statement. The move comes as US President Trump's term in office comes to a close. President-elect Joe Biden said he would stop selling arms to Saudi Arabia over the war it is waging in Yemen. The war, involving a Saudi-led coalition of several Arab nations and the Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, has caused a dire humanitarian crisis and led to international condemnation for the kingdom's role. The package would include 3,000 GBU-39 Small Diameter Bomb I (SDB I) munitions, containers, support equipment, spares and technical support, the Pentagon said. The bomb is produced by Boeing, whom the Pentagon named as the prime contractor. Congress was notified of the possible sale, but notification does not necessarily mean a deal has been reached between the Saudis and US. Members of Congress have expressed anger at the cost in civilian lives in Yemen, with some attempting to stop Persian Gulf countries involved in the Yemen war from purchasing F-35 stealth fighters. The UAE, part of the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthi rebels in Yemen, secured a deal to purchase the state-of-the-art warplanes after normalizing relations with Israel. [See also "Next US Administration Signals Tough Policy on Saudi Arabia" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

### Reuters

## **Turkey, US in Talks to Form Joint Working Group on S-400s**

Turkey and the US have started talks to form a joint working group regarding U.S. sanctions imposed over Ankara's purchase of Russian S-400 missile defence systems, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said. Washington slapped the sanctions on NATO ally Turkey's Defence Industry Directorate (SSB), its chief Ismail Demir and three other employees this month following its acquisition of the S-400s. The sanctions come at a delicate moment in the fraught relationship between Ankara and Washington as Democratic President-elect Joe Biden gears up to take office on Jan. 20. Ankara had previously proposed a working group to assess the potential impact of the S-400s on NATO systems, a suggestion initially rejected by Washington. Speaking at a news conference on Wednesday, Cavusoglu said US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had now indicated interest in setting up a joint working group. Turkey says its purchase of the S-400s was not a choice but a necessity as it was unable to procure air defense systems from any NATO ally on satisfactory terms. Washington says the S-400s pose a threat to its F-35 fighter jets and to NATO's broader defense systems. Turkey rejects this and says S-400s will not be integrated into NATO. Cavusoglu also said on Wednesday that Turkey was ready to take steps to improve ties with the United States and hoped the incoming Biden administration would do the same.

## **More of the Same**

By Ben-Dror Yemini

- **Ron Huldai had an excellent baptism yesterday, but it is entirely unclear whether Avi Nissenkorn is an asset or a liability. Benny Gantz’s appearance was sad and very honest. But that can no longer save Blue & White. With less than three months until the elections, the center bloc, as well as the center-right and the center-left, have not consolidated to form an alternative to government. The right wing has three distinct parties, headed by Netanyahu, Bennett and Saar, with the Haredi satellite parties. The center, for the first time, is battered, crushed and split. There have been center parties in Israel before. They are always in favor of the rule of law. They are always against corruption. They are always in favor of strengthening democracy, which they always say is in danger. They always offer new hope. They are always in favor of unity. They are always in favor of the free market and investing in the weak. But what is their policy on the Palestinian issue? How will they bring the Haredim back into Israel’s fold? We never hear a word about that.**
- **We watched a declining leader who once headed the largest party and the largest bloc, and we also saw a representative of the center trying to take over large swaths of what had become vacant. Even so, it is almost impossible to say what ideological differences divide Nitzan Horowitz from Ron Huldai, just as the difference between Huldai and Gantz is unclear. A drop to the left? A drop to the right? Even if we try, we will barely find nuances of difference, which certainly fail to justify splitting, and which are unlikely to be overcome by Election Day. The problem of the center parties is that it hasn’t produced a leader yet who is capable of filling Rabin’s shoes. Huldai does not have anything new to bring to the table. Gabi Ashkenazi has that something, but he appears to be about to quit the game. Lapid is the steadiest and most serious of the bunch. All of this scurrying in the expanse between Meretz and the Likud is the best thing that could have happened to the right wing. It is faring better even now in the polls. In about 80 days Israel might be the first country in the world that will be able to declare victory over the coronavirus pandemic. Netanyahu—we can count on him—will know how to translate that achievement into seats.**
- **The “anyone but Bibi” bloc’s festivities are premature. Nothing is sewn up. Courage is often a commodity that is sorely lacking in the center. Almost every leader from the center will say, off the record, that there is a problem with the justice system. But in public they will declaim the usual slogans about “the need to strengthen the rule of law” and “the danger to democracy.” Those leaders also know that there isn’t a Palestinian partner and that we therefore have to stop the refrain of “resuming talks with the Palestinians” that aren’t going to go anywhere. They know that a more practical plan must be presented. But they have no backbone. They hide behind clichés. The center doesn’t need clichés. The center needs to present a Jewish-democratic alternative that distinguishes it from the right-wing bloc, which has continued its capitulation to the Haredim and its creeping progress toward a bi-national state.**

## **Disassembling and Reassembling**

By Ben Caspit

- The only thing that Israel does at a faster pace than administer coronavirus vaccines is to establish parties. There isn't another country like it, in which five or six new parties get created out of two parties within the space of a week or two. And more might still be in the offing. Yesterday two new parties were added to the political roster, Ron Huldai and Avi Nissenkorn's The Israelis, and what is left of Benny Gantz's diminished Blue & White. Now we're waiting to see which party Gadi Eisenkot is going to join, what Gabi Ashkenazi is going to do, whether Ehud Barak will enter the fray and what is going to happen with the Shulmans and the protestors [against Netanyahu], who are also planning to form a political platform of their own—so that absolutely everyone is able participate in the swiftest dismantling of any chance of winning the election. As an act of reverse discrimination, let's start with Benny Gantz.
- He gave a good speech yesterday. The horses all bolted his stable long ago, everything around his in going up in flames, but Gantz is still alive, kicking and screaming. Most of what he said yesterday was accurate. I also believe that Blue & White, which didn't receive my vote in the last election, saved the country. As has been written at least two hundred times in this column: no minority government could have been formed [without the Likud]. There was no majority in the Knesset in favor of anti-corruption/anti-Bibi legislation and, even had a majority been mustered, that legislation would have been shot down by the High Court of Justice. The only other option was a fourth election, which would have been more dangerous than ever, or to wait for two defectors to break ranks and to join forces with Balfour Street.
- Gantz and Gabi Ashkenazi threw themselves on the hand grenade. Now they're being ushered away from the bloody scene. One of them has been able to walk out on his own two feet (Ashkenazi), the other is still suffering from shellshock. Blue & White's legacy is that it stopped Netanyahu, saved the law enforcement system, allowed for the defendant's trial to begin despite his efforts to evade justice, and stopped the mad looting of Israel's public and state coffers by the mutation that once upon a time was the governing party. All of that was accomplished. The rest [of the things that Gantz spoke about] wasn't. The [party's] conduct was terrible, the naiveté was unfathomable, the mistakes were never-ending and the decisions were either made at the wrong timing or weren't made at all. But none of that will be recorded in history. In my opinion, despite the disgrace and the shame that Gantz has been forced to bear, despite the fact that he has been turned into the most popular punching bag in the arena, Benny Gantz made a real contribution and we all owe him a debt of gratitude. Now he can go, but he wants to stay. He will have to make the truly difficult decision further down (pun intended) the road. Either he will have to merge with another party (some people said that Chili Tropper has been talking about joining Yamina, less Smotrich) or he will be sewing his own death shroud.

- **Gabi Ashkenazi is the last gentleman of Israeli politics. While Gantz and Nissenkorn have been bickering over who gets custody over the extension cord and have been airing out their dirty laundry in public, Ashkenazi has done what he always does and has gone underground, where he is roaming about disguised as the foreign minister (Foreign Ministry officials are madly in love with him), and has hasn't uttered a peep in public. He isn't going to lash out at Gantz. He isn't going to lash out at Nissenkorn either. He isn't going to do anything that might undermine either of them. And with those good qualities he expected to succeed in politics. At least he's got a sense of humor. Ashkenazi wouldn't take Blue & White now even if Gantz were to offer it to him. And I'm not sure that Gantz wouldn't offer Ashkenazi to switch places in order to save the Blue & White brand. Ashkenazi believes that that brand is dead. He takes full responsibility for the decision to join Netanyahu and doesn't regret that decision for all of the reasons that Gantz cited in his speech. He is inclined to sit this next election out. He believes that Eisenkot will decide to sit it out as well. Maybe they'll come back in the election after next (October 2021?) with a new party, the Golanchiks, or maybe there will be a surprise development that prompts them to parachute into the arena in this upcoming election.**
- **Eisenkot is still deliberating. On the one hand, he doesn't really want to serve in the Knesset just two years after doffing his uniform. He is also a bit leery of Gideon Saar's Elkin-ization. He declined offers to amend the law so that he could be appointed a cabinet minister. He won't forgive himself if his decision to sit this election out results in the opportunity of ousting the Netanyahu family from power and freeing the State of Israel from its grip being missed. People have been telling him that his decision to join forces with Saar could be the big game-changer. He isn't sure whether he ought to believe them. That brings us to Huldai who, in my opinion, is the best manager in Israel.**
- **His speech yesterday was accurate and stirring, even if the delivery was more intense than was warranted. Nissenkorn's remarks were also persuasive and were even moving. Anyone who still believes in the rule of law is being called to the flag. Anyone who wants Israel to look like Tel Aviv—ditto. Huldai's goal is to tear down the large parking lot that Gideon Saar has opened up for himself in the heart of the city. Let's not forget that Huldai is mayor. Will he succeed? The next polls will show us the trend. Knowing Gideon Saar, he is likely to pull another electoral card out from up his sleeve before the weekend polls. We've never had an election like this one in which everything is wide open, anything is possible, the left is mixed up with the right, which has embedded itself deep in the center that is disguising itself as the right with the goal of ousting Bibi from office at any price—or the opposite.**
- **Two other things happened yesterday that on the face of things were peripheral to the news—but not really. Avigdor Liberman, who is the most seasoned politician in Israel (after Netanyahu), said yesterday that as opposed to all of the other knights who are charging on their horses in the arena, he isn't running for prime minister. Rather, he intends to demand the finance portfolio in order to oversee Israel's economic rehabilitation. That was a fairly surprising and spot-on political declaration. Liberman, who is a courageous decision making machine, will be able to pull the cart out of the mud in which Netanyahu his collaborator, Katz, have mired it. If and when.**

- The other thing that happened yesterday while the Israeli political arena was in an expedited process of disassembly and reassembly, was Hamas held a military exercise in cooperation with Islamic Jihad across the entire Gaza Strip. Barrages of rockets were fired into the Mediterranean Sea; the exercise also include simulated naval commando raids, abduction operations, the use of large numbers of troops in units of various sizes, combat methods, intelligence and control and even drones.
- I remember how everyone scoffed when the first Kassam rockets appeared. Nowadays we are a bit less dismissive. The same goes for the first signs of a Hamas air force. No, they will never be a match for the IAF, but the time has come to begin to take them seriously. Just think what Netanyahu would say if he were chairman of the opposition and not prime minister now. “How can you sleep at night in Jerusalem when 80 kilometers from here terror [sic] is establishing a state, is establishing a trained army, is drilling troops and firing rockets in broad daylight, fearlessly, right under our noses?” he would say with his famous baritone delivery. “Anyone who goes to sleep with Hamas wakes up with Hizbullah,” the great prophet of fighting terrorism would say, and then he would promise: “When I take power I’ll give the IDF the order to topple Hamas’s regime and to purge the terror nest in Gaza.” Oh, hold on a moment, he already said all that back in 2009? And he’s been prime minister ever since? I forgot for a moment.