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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

January 11, 2021

Times of Israel

Ya'Alon Kicks off Campaign: 'Netanyahu, Your Time is up'

Former defense minister Moshe Ya'alon, leader of the center right Telem party, launched his election campaign, a day after confirming his split from the Yesh Atid party. In a speech, Ya'alon vowed to remove Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, his ally-turned-rival, from power, underlining the corruption charges against the premier. He predicted more people will join his anti-Netanyahu slate, and called for unity despite the center-left political parties being more fragmented than ever. Aligning himself with the protest movement against Netanyahu, Ya'alon is courting the centrist vote, though his views are squarely right-wing. A hawk on Iran and staunch supporter of settlements, Ya'alon famously caused diplomatic tensions with the US in 2014, when he called then-secretary of state John Kerry "messianic and obsessive." [See also "Netanyahu's Rivals Liken Him to Trump as World Reels From Capitol Riots" \(AI-Monitor\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Lapid: Ready to Cooperate with SA'AR in Government

Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid expressed willingness to cooperate with New Hope candidate Gideon Sa'ar in the next government, which they both hope to form. Lapid said during a media briefing that on issues like annexation and matters of religion and state, Sa'ar has opposite views, but that those issues would not prevent cooperating in the formation of a future government. He said they had good relations, had served in the same government before and could work together in the future. When asked about cooperating with Lapid to form a government, Sa'ar told KAN Radio that such cooperation could only come with him replacing Netanyahu. Asked about President Trump's supporters storming the Capitol last week, Sa'ar criticized both Trump and Netanyahu, without mentioning the latter by name. [See also "TV Poll Shows Likud Rising, but Netanyahu Lacks Clear Majority; Huldai Fading" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Gantz Denounces Terror, Condemns Settler Attack on Officer

Alternative Prime Minister Benny Gantz denounced terror as he condemned an alleged physical attack by a settler against a Golani officer during a West Bank protest outside the Kedumim settlement. Samaria Regional Council head Yossi Dagan also condemned any violence against soldiers, but at the same time said that according to procedure, female officers should have been on hand to disperse the protesters. He added that the complaint that soldiers had inappropriately handled the female protesters was also very serious. The left-wing group Peace Now said that there was nothing unique in the attack and that similar incidents had occurred time and again without any qualitative steps taken to quell the violence. [See also "Gantz Meeting with Settlers Has Not Led to Outpost Legalization" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Palestinians: Israel Shrugging Duty to Provide Vaccines

The Palestinian Authority (PA) released a statement claiming that Israel has “clear legal and human rights obligations” toward the Palestinian people, requiring it to provide them with COVID-19 vaccines. As the Jewish state [leads](#) the world in vaccinations per capita, the PA stressed that Israel “controls the entry and exit of all persons and goods, including medical supplies, entering the State of Palestine.” The PA’s statement comes amid a [Guardian](#) report, citing human rights groups, that suggested that Israel has been excluding Palestinians from its coronavirus vaccination scheme in favor of Jewish settlers. An Israeli NGO, however, slammed the report, mentioning that the interim Oslo Accords signed in the 90s put international vaccination obligations on the PA -- further noting that the Palestinians had never asked Israel for support against COVID-19. [See also “Palestinian Authority Says Astrazeneca Vaccines Could Come in March” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Hamas Scrambles for Relevance in Post-Normalization ME

Hamas has agreed to reengage in a reconciliation process with PA President Mahmoud Abbas and move toward [elections](#) in the West Bank and Gaza. This may all sound familiar. The parties have started down this road before, but this time it just might happen. Economic conditions in Gaza are grim, and a recent UN Conference on Trade and Development report warns that Gaza’s economy is “near collapse.” The larger issue for Hamas is its isolation, which is increased by the normalization agreement between Israel and the UAE, [Bahrain](#), Morocco and Sudan; US-brokered reconciliation among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states; and a new push for an Israeli-Palestinian peace conference, led by Abbas and Egypt. With a new US administration coming in, Iran, Hamas, Syria and Hezbollah find themselves even more on the outside looking in with regard to regional trends. So, Hamas is looking to play as many cards as possible, to stay relevant and engaged as events unfold. [See also “Elections in the PA: Not a Magic Wand” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Iran's \$7B Gamble: 'Slap in the Face to South Korea'

The fallout from Iran's seizure of a South Korean-flagged tanker- which the US described as extortion - continues, after Tehran argued that Seoul is the real hostage-taker for refusing to release up to \$7b of its money. As [The Financial Times](#) reported, Iran indulged in two highly provocative and potentially risky moves, fewer than 20 days until President-elect Joe Biden takes over the White House. It decided that it would vastly exceed the limits of uranium enrichment imposed upon it according to the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal - increasing it to 20%. Although Biden is thought to be personally warm to the idea of returning to the deal, such a flagrant move could complicate matters between Washington and Tehran. In addition, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) seizure of the MK Hankuk Chemi - on the spurious official pretext of "oil pollution and environmental hazards," should be seen in the context of Iran attempting to extract its money from South Korean banks. [See also “Tehran Reveals Underground Missile Base Near Persian Gulf” \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Israeli Gov't Panel Bars Chevron-Delek Gas Drilling Bid

The government's Committee for Reducing Business Concentration is recommending that the Energy Ministry bar bids from Chevron and Delek Drilling for gas-exploration licenses being offered in Block 72, citing Delek's grip on the economy. The two companies, which now control the lion's share of Israeli natural gas production through their Tamar and Leviathan fields, were one of two groups that bid in September for rights to Block 72. The other is the Greek energy company Energean, which operates the much smaller Karish and Tanin fields. But the committee, which is headed by Michal Halperin, the competition commissioner, noted that Delek already controls half the natural gas production nationwide. Awarding it Block 72 would enhance the already immense power of Delek's controlling shareholder, Yitzhak Tshuva, over the economy. The Energy Ministry said it had accepted the committee's stance and was now examining options. Sources at Delek termed it a "puzzling" decision. Delek-Chevron's bidding for Block 72 had elicited strong opposition from social-justice groups such as the Movement for Quality Government in Israel and Lobby 99. Citing the market share the group already held, Lobby 99 had said last month that the decision on Block 72 was critical.

US to Designate Houthi Movement as Terrorist Group

The US plans to designate Yemen's Houthi movement as a foreign terrorist organization, Secretary of State Pompeo said, a move that diplomats and aid groups worry could threaten peace talks and complicate efforts to combat the world's largest humanitarian crisis. The decision to blacklist the Iran-aligned group, comes as the administration of President-elect Joe Biden prepares to take over from the Trump administration. A Houthi leader said in a Twitter post that the movement, which has been battling a Saudi-led coalition in Yemen since 2015, reserved the right to respond to any designation. The Trump administration has been piling on sanctions related to Iran, prompting some Biden allies and outside analysts to conclude that Trump aides are seeking to make it harder for the incoming administration to re-engage with Iran and rejoin an international nuclear agreement. Aid groups and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres had warned against a possible designation, saying Yemen was in imminent danger of the worst famine the world has seen for decades. Pompeo said the US planned to put in place measures to reduce the impact of the step on humanitarian activity and imports into Yemen, where 80% of the population needs help. The foreign ministry of Yemen's Saudi-backed government, which the Houthis ousted from power in the capital, Sanaa, in late 2014, supported the designation and called for further "political and legal pressure" on the Houthis. Saudi Arabia, which has been attacked by cross-border Houthi missiles and drones, has yet to comment. [See also "What Impact Could U.S. Blacklisting of Houthis Have on Yemen's War?" \(Reuters\)](#)

Dangerous Recipe

By Prof. Gad Barzilai

- **The No one would have believed something like this could happen in the US. Not since 1814, when British forces occupied and burned down the American capital has something like this happened -- and this time, by angry, violent American citizens trying to thwart the process of ratifying the results of an election for president by the Congress of the United States. Since the end of the Civil War in 1865, an incident like this has seemed far from the realm of possibility, and certainly not something to worry about. But before our stunned eyes, last Wednesday the sitting president of the US called for a violent takeover of Congress, the breathing heart of democracy in the US. The very symbol of liberal-democracy in the world since the end of the second World War.**
- **No, it wasn't a revolution or a coup. But it was certainly a violent insurrection incited by the president of the US against his own administration in nasty disregard for the election results. In the winner-takes-all system, there are no negotiations between parties to form a government, political contests run the very real risk of sliding into violence. But far more basic than that: One must consider the roots of Trump's rise and ultimate victory four years ago. A combination of evangelistic Christian churches -- some of which are mega-churches with hundreds of thousands of active believers and millions more who listen to their preachers -- doesn't leave much fertile ground for democracy.**
- **What we saw last Wednesday wasn't coincidental and it wasn't divorced from reality. Rather, it was anchored in a social-economic-religious-cultural splintering in the US. Trump didn't just incite [this riot]. He is trapped inside the social structure that led to his election, and now he's leading to its humiliating demise. The president is not only the hangman, he is also a victim of the system that allowed him into a place he should never have been in the first place. Could it happen here? True, there are significant differences between Israel and the US.**
- **The trauma of the Holocaust, military service, an extremely effective justice system and effective oversight by judicial regulators should in theory prevent similar scenes from taking place in Israel. At the same time, Israeli society is also riven with socio-economic gaps, and these gaps are getting bigger because of the coronavirus crisis. The gap between supporters and opponents of Prime Minister Netanyahu who is under indictment for multiple charges of political corruption, the clash about our national identity and the future of the territories, the impact of the occupation on Israeli society and the religious and national extremism are a dangerous recipe. What happened in Washington could happen in Jerusalem.**

With Friends Like That

By Einav Schiff

- The value of Donald Trump’s publicly traded shares has plummeted like the shares of an airline company in March 2020. Even the most skilled charlatans were unable—and not for lack of trying—to separate the actions and behavior of the American president from the storming of Capitol Hill, which was designed to disrupt ratifying the results of the elections. For years they tried to distinguish between his “rhetoric” and his “policy,” between the words he used and the dangerous potential that was inherent in them. And then came the terror attack against democracy, which was executed in keeping with Trump’s talking points after he had egged the perpetrators on just a short time before and left them [the above-cited charlatans] in a state of discomfiture that lasted at least a few minutes. Worry not—none of them are going to do any soul-searching.
- No serious discussion has been held in Israel either about the four years of personality cult. In the course of Trump’s term in office, Israel became as red a state as Wyoming. The synergy between the White House and the prime minister, after eight years of hostility under the Obama administration, was successfully sold to the public in Israel as a gift that warranted dancing the Hora in the streets. Anyone who cringed from the bone-breaking embrace with him was painted in unpatriotic colors. The real “deal of the century” was as follows: the man in orange gave Netanyahu everything he asked for, more or less, in exchange for the one thing that he truly craves: unbearably embarrassing displays of admiration, including having a new settlement named after him on the Golan Heights. From Trump’s perspective, that went along perfectly well with appeasing his evangelical base—another group that is championed here irrespective of its basic religious tenets—producing at least one spot on the globe that was fun to look at (when he wasn’t watching Fox News or on Twitter).
- Now some people are trying to tell us that Israel made the most of that arrangement without giving up anything. But in practice, Trump’s personality, which measures everyone exclusively through the prism of his own ego, doesn’t allow for relationships of that kind to exist. As a result, turning him into an icon went hand-in-hand with accepting and even encouraging the entire set of values that he brought with him to the White House—especially since he never tried to conceal what he believes in. From his contemptible attitude towards women and to his refusal to accept the outcome of the elections—everything was in plain view and was well known even before he was elected to office.
- The dangerous game he played with white supremacists in America, including neo-Nazis, was played in full view, as his disgraceful reaction to the events in Charlottesville proved. Obviously, Trump’s numerous supporters in Israel did not have to decide whether to cast a ballot for him at the polling stations. They are unlike the many American conservatives, tens of millions of people, who agreed to his takeover of the Republican Party and who agreed to see it devoured by Trumpism, and who now have to face the consequences of that. Nevertheless, the identification of Israel with Trump and his administration was

quite the exception in the close relationship between the two countries, and it was certainly quite different from the skepticism and criticism of other Western countries [toward Trump]. With all due respect to real politik and the duty of every country to navigate among the various interests, it is hard to deny that there was and apparently still is a love story here. If you were horrified by the footage out of Washington last week, that love story and its repercussions for Israel and its moral image ought to break your heart as well.