



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
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Israel and Middle East News Update

Tuesday, January 12

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News Excerpts

January 12, 2021

Ynet News

Gantz Urges Center-Left Parties to Unite Against Netanyahu

Blue & White leader Benny Gantz urged center-left parties to unite in a bid to oust Prime Minister Netanyahu in the upcoming March 2021 elections, saying he was "ready to sacrifice a lot" to initiate such a move. "I shook the hand of this man whom I pledged to replace, I shook the hand of a serial promise-breaker," the former military chief said in a televised address to the nation. "I shook it because the State of Israel is at war and I am foremost its soldier. I was wrong. While a real and lethal pandemic is raging and threatening the lives of all of us, Netanyahu continued to divide and incite because it serves his personal interest and so he can escape his day in court." [See also "Smotrich Confirms He'll Split From Yamina and Field Independent Run" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Times of Israel

Israel: \$50.4b Budget Deficit in 2020 — Largest in History

Israel's budget deficit for 2020 was its highest ever, at \$50.4b, or 11.7% of its GDP, the Finance Ministry said. The huge deficit — some three times higher than that of 2019 — was expected, due to the severe economic effects of the coronavirus pandemic. Despite the soaring deficit, the ministry reported that GDP only dropped by some 3.3% — a better state of affairs than had been feared. Bank of Israel kept its benchmark rate at an all-time low of 0.1%, saying that the fast pace of inoculation against the pandemic "increases optimism regarding a rapid return of the economy to a path of growth in the coming year." The central bank said that the GDP is expected to grow by 6.3% in 2021, and the broad unemployment rate is expected to decline during the year to 7.7% of the labor force in the fourth quarter of 2021. [See also "Israeli Women Bear Brunt of Pandemic's Financial Crisis" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Reuters

Netanyahu Orders More Settler Homes Built

[Netanyahu](#) ordered construction plans advanced for new Jewish settler homes in the occupied West Bank, anchoring the projects in the final days of the pro-settlement Trump administration. The timing of the move appeared to be an attempt to set Israel's blueprint in indelible ink before Joe Biden, who has been critical of its settlement policies, becomes president. Moving ahead with the projects could help shore up support for Netanyahu from settlers and their backers in the upcoming election, in which the conservative leader faces new challenges from the [right](#). An announcement by Netanyahu's office said about 800 homes would be built in the settlements of Beit El and Givat Zeev, north of Jerusalem, and in Tal Menashe, Rehelim, Shavei Shomron, Barkan and Karnei Shomron in the northern West Bank. [See also "After Approving Settlements, Gantz Advances Permits for Palestinian Construction" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Egypt, Germany, France, Jordan Meet to Revive Peace Talks

The foreign ministers of Egypt, Jordan, France and Germany met in Cairo to discuss ways to revive [Israeli-Palestinian](#) peace talks. The group discussed "potential steps to advance the Middle East peace process" with a focus on "re-launching a credible peace process between the Palestinians and Israelis," a joint statement read. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said the meeting was aimed at getting Israelis and Palestinians to start talks, building upon the "positive regional context" linked to the recent string of normalization agreements between the Jewish State and several Arab countries. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said that his country was working on a two-state solution "taking into account regional and international changes." This meeting comes as the President of the Palestinian Authority (PA), Mahmoud Abbas, called for an international conference in early 2021. [See also "Palestinians, Jordan Accuse Israel of 'Judaizing' Western Wall Plaza" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

B'Tselem, for First Time, Labels Israel an Apartheid State

Israel is an apartheid state, B'Tselem said for the first time in its 31-year history. In response to its statement, the left-wing Israeli NGO was accused of being antisemitic. Created in 1989 during the first intifada, B'Tselem documents human-rights abuses in the West Bank, east Jerusalem and Gaza. In submissions and oral testimonies to the UN, European governments and the EU, it has alleged that Israelis have committed human-rights violations. B'Tselem has accused Israel of apartheid-like practices in the past and spoken out against a two-tiered system: one for Palestinians and one for Jews. But it has never crossed the line to denounce the entire state as an apartheid one. Nor has B'Tselem looked at it as a single geographic entity that includes both the areas within and without sovereign Israel. In a report, B'Tselem listed other instances in which Jewish rights were prioritized over those of Palestinians in areas over the pre-1967 lines and over those of Israeli-Arabs within sovereign Israel. [See also "Jenin, Jenin' Screenings Banned in Israel as Court Orders Damages for Soldier" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ynet News

Israel Hits New Record High with 9,589 Daily Infections

Israel saw its highest ever daily infection rate with 9,589 new coronavirus diagnoses despite the stringent lockdown that has been in place since Thursday. Israel crossed the threshold of half a million infections since the start of the outbreak, becoming the 29th country in the world to do so. There are currently 1,759 COVID-19 patients in hospitals across Israel, with 1,027 of them in serious condition, including 247 patients who are connected to ventilators. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, 3,704 people have succumbed to the disease in Israel. With the continuing rise in coronavirus infections and deaths, Israel's hospitals are reporting overcrowded wards, overworked staff and a lack of manpower due to quarantine and infections. As of Tuesday morning, there were 74,639 active COVID cases in Israel, of which 14,650 were in Jerusalem, 3,880 in Bnei Brak, 3,002 in Modi'in Illit, 2,265 in Beit Shemesh, 2,109 in Tel Aviv-Jaffa, 1,983 in Petah Tikva and 1,956 in Haifa.

IAEA Chief: Iran Moving Rapidly to Enrich Uranium

The head of the UN's nuclear watchdog said that there were "weeks" left to salvage the nuclear deal with Iran. Rafael Grossi, director of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), said that Tehran was advancing "quite rapidly" toward enriching uranium to 20%, as it has announced it would, in breach of the accord. He said the IAEA has assessed Iran will be able to produce some 10 kilograms a month. The comments came two days after Iranian lawmaker Ahmad Amirabadi Farahani declared that Tehran would expel IAEA inspectors in February unless the US lifts its sanctions on Iran. UN inspections of Iran's nuclear sites are a key part of a 2015 pact with world powers that saw sanctions lifted from Iran in return for its dismantling the weapons aspects of its nuclear program. The US unilaterally withdrew from the agreement in 2018, and the remaining countries that signed it with Iran — [Germany](#), [France](#), Britain, China and Russia — have been trying to keep the accord from collapsing. [See also "Pompeo, in Tuesday Speech, to Accuse Iran of Al Qaeda Links" \(Reuters\)](#)

Morocco Arrests Lebanese Hezbollah Terrorist Member

Moroccan police arrested a Lebanese member of the terrorist organization Hezbollah for alleged identity theft and fraud, according to a report in the Moroccan media. According to Morocco World News (MWN), the General Directorate of National Security (DGSN) said that the National Brigade of Judicial Police "conducted the arrest in Casablanca after the General Directorate of Territorial Surveillance (DGST) provided detailed information on the suspect's whereabouts." The 57-year-old suspect manufactured a false identity, claiming he was the manager of a foreign firm, and used false French and Portuguese passports. The outlet said the "Moroccan security services found that the passports have been reported as stolen in the database of the International Criminal Police Organization." In addition to the passports, the Moroccan police seized driving licenses that contained the names of French, Portuguese, and Italian citizens. [See also "After Close to 21 Years, Israel to Reopen Morocco Mission in 'Days" \(I24 News\)](#)

The Still-Missing Vaccine

By Gad Lior

- There has been a sense of euphoria in the air in the last few days. Ironically, in the middle of a strict lockdown, when the majority of Israel's citizens are stuck at home, when infection is higher than ever—a light has suddenly shined at the end of the pandemic tunnel. Almost two million Israelis have been vaccinated, some have even had both doses. Suddenly, the dream of sitting with friends at a café on Saturday and working out at the gym again seems imminent.
- But is this fatal pandemic truly behind us? Not at all. We realized as early as the first days of the first lockdown that the health pandemic was accompanied by an economic pandemic, that this was not a case of only one pandemic. Only two weeks after the virus began to quickly spread throughout Israel, a lockdown was declared. Who would have believed then that the word “lockdown” would be appended to a number: the first, the second, the third. Within days, a million and a quarter workers, who until a minute ago had earned a dignified living, found themselves without a job, stuck at home, with no work. Some of them have since been fired. Most of them, more than a million people, were put on unpaid “leave.” It was no vacation.
- Since then, not at all in the blink of an eye, ten months have elapsed. The health pandemic delivered a harsh blow to Israel's citizens, but the vaccine is now here, and one of the two pandemics will most likely evaporate. That is the good news. But there is also bad news. We are left with the economic pandemic—and as of now, there is no vaccine for it. Close to 750,000 Israelis have no jobs. In just the last few days, 20,000 of them were fired. They did not even receive unpaid “vacation” pay.
- Another 100,000 workers were sent home again, with no date set for their return to work. They joined the hundreds of thousands others, some of whom have been at home for six months, eight months and ten months. And what is being done for them by the people who made sure to be photographed next to the vaccines? Nothing. Veritably nothing. True, they receive unemployment benefits, but many of them have lost their jobs. In five months, when their unemployment benefits run out, hundreds of thousands will have no work and no money to live on. Why? Because the government simply fell asleep. The German model, which keeps workers at their jobs, was not adopted.
- Many months were wasted without training even some of the hundreds of thousands to work new jobs. Instead of only closing the red cities—the entire country was shut down, with its businesses, its malls and its shops. Entire industries—tourism, art, entertainment and food—were shuttered. 80,000 businesses closed. The vaccine to the economic pandemic is farther away than ever.

February 21, 2019-January 11, 2021

By Sima Kadmon

- **Blue & White had a short life. The chairman dug its grave last night and personally carved into its headstone: 2.21.2012-1.11.2021. It's been two years since Benny Gantz went to Expo Tel Aviv and delivered an unripe, naïve speech that was filled with good intentions and high spirits. The center-left camp, which had failed to produce an alternative to the government for so many years, welcomed him as its new Messiah. Still not quite ripe, but far less naïve and far more defeated, he faced the cameras yesterday and only was given a few minutes of airtime. His personal appeal to the center-left camp's numerous party chairs, imploring them to meet and find common ground, can only be understood as a desperate cry of "take me, don't leave me all alone, in the dark, on the verge of the electoral threshold." And when he proposed that they set aside their egos, Gantz was effectively telling them that he was willing to forego the lead and take whatever slot they gave him.**
- **Anyone who always insists on looking for hidden motives can find them in Gantz's special situation. Even though Blue & White has fallen apart and has a laughable number of seats, [Gantz] is still alternate prime minister and theoretically could still move into Balfour as long as he retains his place as a Member of Knesset. For Gantz, who over the past year has accumulated considerable anger, frustration, and hatred towards the person who reduced him to this state, this is a turbo engine. It must be said that it was somewhat puzzling for Gantz to call on the left-wing party chairs to unite yesterday, particularly given the report of his attempts to veer to the right. And proposing a merger with Lapid, just a week after having spat in his face by saying that he "hates people," does not exactly inspire respect. And suggesting that they put aside their egos can be noble, but not when you're the leader of a party that is almost certainly not going to cross the electoral threshold.**
- **But Gantz is right. The left-wing parties are insanely divided. Anyone who wants to see a camp commit suicide on live TV should look at the parties in the center-left camp. Every party that receives fragments of a percent and is unlikely to cross the electoral threshold thinks that they're the one who should lead the camp. If people don't come to their senses, get some perspective, and realize their real size by February 4, then hundreds of thousands of votes will go down the drain. "We'll spare no effort to bring about mergers that will lead to a sane and liberal government that will change the country," Lapid told me yesterday in response to Gantz's speech. He didn't even hear him.**
- **Almost symbolically, he was busy with a Zoom call with dozens of Yesh Atid campaign office directors in the Jerusalem and Judean foothills area, who were being instructed ahead of the campaign election. True to form, Lapid prefers to be kind rather than cruel. Despite having a bellyful with Gantz, he is goal-oriented. It can almost be said with certainty that he won't hesitate to bring back both Gantz and Yaalon if it serves his objective of toppling Netanyahu. But what chance does such a merger really have? Shelah won't accept Lapid as number one since he left him for that reason, after all.**

- **Nissenkorn won't agree to serve under Gantz, and Gantz can't stand Nissenkorn. Lieberman has since said that he's not on board, and Huldai didn't get Dan Harel just to be merely an MK. Everyone will come with expectations, and everyone will demand spots [on a merged Knesset list]. It's hard to believe that Lapid is prepared to be the cow that everyone milks and to head a faction in which two thirds of its members are not from his party.**
- **For example, Yaalon got five realistic slots from Gantz. Who will give him that today? But the Telem chairman presented his slate on Sunday, which included ex-minister Izhar Shay, Prof. Hagai Levine, and two more MKs. He was lucky that his Arab candidate, the attorney Ayman Abu Raya, was found unsuitable about two hours after he was introduced on the list. As everyone from Avi Gabbay to Ron Huldai can attest, the first day in politics is the best. It's very hard to soar if you don't do it immediately. Tnufa Chairman Ofer Shelah knows that too. He too experienced a sort of shock when he discovered that his party was polling far below the electoral threshold.**
- **Yesterday he issued a declaration to the media, calling on Huldai, Nissenkorn and the Labor Party chairs (that party has more chairpersons than voters) to come and meet. So Huldai can hang billboards that say, "There are Only Two Leaders," referring to Netanyahu and himself. It mostly comes across as out of touch and embarrassing when you only have five seats. There are ten parties that all believe that they can squeeze this lemon. There aren't even close to enough seats to go around.**