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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, January 13*

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# News Excerpts

January 13, 2021

## Times of Israel

### **Gantz Snubbed After Reaching Out to Opposition Leaders**

Blue & White leader Benny Gantz reached out again to Yesh Atid's Yair Lapid, saying that he is not under the delusion that he will be premier after the March elections and that his former political partner can head up the bloc of parties opposing Prime Minister Netanyahu. According to Channel 12, Gantz reached out to all the parties that oppose Netanyahu and asked for a meeting but was snubbed. Gantz, who entered politics vowing to replace Netanyahu, merged his Israel Resilience party with Yesh Atid to form Blue & White under his leadership, and failed in three elections to form a coalition without Netanyahu's Likud. While he campaigned on the promise that he would not serve in a government with Netanyahu so long as the prime minister faces corruption charges, Gantz agreed to do just that in late March, and formed a unity government with Netanyahu. [See also "Gantz Unity Plea Falls Flat, but His Deep Coffers Are Nothing to Sneeze at" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## Ynet News

### **Leaders Bid Farewell to Jewish Philatropist Sheldon Adelson**

Israeli leaders expressed their condolences after the passing of American Jewish businessman and political donor, Sheldon [Adelson](#) who has passed away at the age of 87. Netanyahu called the casino mogul "one of the biggest philanthropists in Jewish history" and sent his condolences to Adlestein's wife, Miriam. Adelson died in Las Vegas after a battle with cancer. President Reuven Rivlin took to Twitter to mourn Adelson's passing. President Trump, who had enjoyed financial support from Adelson since the launch of his 2016 presidential campaign, said Adelson lived a true American story. "The world has lost a great man. He will be missed," he said. [See also "Adelson: Paid to Play, and Played in a Huge Way" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## Reuters

### **France Condemns Plan to Build Settler Homes in West Bank**

France condemned Israel's plan to advance construction of 800 Jewish settler homes in the occupied West Bank in a move to cement the projects shortly before pro-settlement President Trump leaves office. In a statement, the French Foreign Ministry urged Israeli authorities to drop the plan. Referring to Israel and the Palestinians, who seek a state in Israeli-occupied territory, it said: "(We) call on the parties to avoid any unilateral measures that could jeopardize the two-state solution founded on international law and agreed parameters." Most countries view Israeli settlements as violating international law. Israel disputes this, citing historical, political and biblical links to the West Bank, where more than 440,000 Israeli settlers now live among 3 million Palestinians who have limited self-rule under Israeli occupation. [See also "Israel to Advance West Bank Building 3 Days Prior to Biden Inauguration" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## **Qatari Aid Funds to Be Transferred to Gaza This Week**

A new batch of Qatari funds allocated as assistance to the Gaza Strip will be transferred into the restive enclave in the coming week. Gaza is reportedly set to receive \$10m, but it is yet to be specified how the funds will be split between payouts to families, aid to educational institutions, welfare and other venues. Factions in Gaza recently warned Israel via mediators that delays in the transfer would result in a new uptick of tensions. The Gaza groups also launched balloons laden with explosives and incendiary devices into Israeli territory, warning Israel against using the final days of the Trump administration to strike the enclave. Qatar pledged to continue providing assistance to Gaza throughout 2021. Besides providing humanitarian assistance to Gaza's struggling residents, this initiative also aims to calm [tensions](#) between Hamas and Israel. [See also "Israel Has Moral Duty and Health Need to Vaccinate Palestinians" \(Ynet News\)](#)

### Jerusalem Post

## **Ashkenazi, Palestinian FM Were Invited to Launch Talks**

The foreign ministers of Egypt, Jordan, France and Germany attempted to bring Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi and his [Palestinian Authority](#) (PA) counterpart, Riyad al-Maliki, together for talks this week, a senior Foreign Ministry source said. The foreign ministers, a forum known as the Munich Group, convened in Cairo on Monday. They had originally invited Ashkenazi and Maliki to take part together, but they did not move past the preliminary request. Ashkenazi declined to take advantage of possibilities suggested by Foreign Ministry staff for him to be able to return without quarantining, feeling it was inappropriate to travel when other Israelis cannot leave the country, the source said. Aside from Ashkenazi's stated reason to the foreign ministers, he likely avoided meeting with Maliki because Israel has traditionally sought US mediation for talks with the Palestinians. [See also "Hamas Credits Abbas Rival Dahlan for UAE Assistance to Gaza" \(I24 News\)](#)

### Times of Israel

## **Syria Says Israeli Airstrikes Hit Sites Near Iraq Border**

Israeli airstrikes after targeted a number of sites near the Iraqi border, Syrian media reported. According to Syria's official SANA news agency, the strikes hit the areas of Albu Kamal and Deir Ezzor. The report said officials were assessing if any damage or casualties were caused. The IDF had no comment on the late-night strikes, in accordance with its policy to neither confirm nor deny its operations in Syria, save for those in retaliation for an attack from the country. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a pro-Syrian opposition organization said that at least 18 strikes had targetted bases and storehouses used by pro-Iranian militias. It said there were no immediate reports of casualties. The area targeted has reportedly been repeatedly struck by Israel in recent years as it houses a number of bases used by Iranian-backed groups and is key to a land corridor for Tehran that links Iran across Iraq and Syria through Lebanon, which Iran uses to smuggle in weapons and rockets, mainly to the Hezbollah terror group. [See also "IDF Says It Arrested Shepherd Who Entered Israel From Lebanon" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Reuters

## **Pompeo: Iran Gives Al Qaeda New 'Home Base,'**

Secretary of State Pompeo said without providing hard evidence that al Qaeda had established a new home base in [Iran](#) and that it was time “for America and all free nations to crush the Iran-al-Qaeda axis.” The comments, rejected by Iran as “warmongering lies,” in some ways echoed former President George W. Bush’s 2002 description of Iraq, Iran and North Korea as part of an “axis of evil” -- a comment he made about a year before invading Iraq. With 8 days left in President Trump’s term, Pompeo said Iran had allowed al Qaeda, the group blamed for the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the US, to establish a new operational headquarters there despite skepticism about the claim within the US intelligence community and among independent analysts. Pompeo asserted that the Iranian government had provided safe havens as well as logistical support such as ID cards and passports to enable al Qaeda activity and said the group had “centralized its leadership” inside Iran. [See also “Iran Says It Won’t Expel Nuclear Watchdog Inspectors” \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

## **Protests in Jerusalem: 7 Arrested Near Netanyahu's House**

Seven protesters who took part in a demonstration near the Prime Minister's Residence in Jerusalem, were arrested and detained for questioning, The Jerusalem Post's sister publication Maariv reported. A hundred demonstrators marched from Gershon Agron Street towards the Prime Minister's Residence plaza in protest of the postponement of Netanyahu's trial due to the coronavirus lockdown. The protesters used clown horns and claimed to have done so in accordance with Israel's noise regulations and the High Court ruling, insisting that they were allowed to do so. However, the commander of the Moriah Police station in Jerusalem objected to this and claimed that it was forbidden to demonstrate. The demonstrators blocked major junctions and the residents in the area couldn't leave their parking lots on their way to work. The police later informed the protesters that they were holding an illegal demonstration due to the early hour they had arrived, waking up the all neighborhood on their way. Last week, the Jerusalem District Court ordered the postponement of Netanyahu’s trial on Friday, citing the coronavirus lockdown and the large number of necessary participants. The order could potentially postpone the calling of witnesses to right before March 23, when Israel goes to elections, or right after.

## **The Center-Left's Suicide**

By Shelly Yachimovich

- **The ability of one individual to “get seats,” even just to cross the electoral threshold, is a rare ability. There are no more than ten such people in and around the political establishment. The overwhelming majority of politicians are there thanks to a party chairperson who has that rare ability and did them a favor by placing them on their list. Even fewer were “selected” by their rabbis or by a limited group who gave them a term in the Knesset, but who would never cast a ballot for them in a national election. And yet, we are currently bearing witness to a mad spectacle. Every few seconds someone suddenly stands up, disconnects from the mothership and the ground of reality, thinking that he’s a people, or at least a party, and starts walking. Where to? God only knows.**
- **The spectators stare in befuddlement and wait compassionately for the moment when he falls on his nose into a murky puddle of wasted votes, and he sees nothing, blinded by love. Self-love, for he would forego this egocentric journey if he loved us even a little. The center-left’s collapse in the polls is nothing less than frightening. The politics of “anyone but Bibi” has erased every remnant and memory of ideology and content. It has made racists into heroes of the protest at Balfour just because they are anti-Netanyahu. It is currently causing the right-wing bloc to poll at 75-80 seats, a monstrous historic increase that is much higher than the right-wing’s positions are representative of the public.**
- **Take Gideon Saar, who is for all intents and purposes a right-winger, an intelligent guy who doesn’t resort to cursing [his opponents] and give him your left-wing voice because he’s anti-Bibi. Would the American Democrats, who Trump drove to the brink of revulsion and disgust, conceive of replacing him with another, saner Republican candidate who was nevertheless right-wing in every possible sense, instead of voting for a reasonable Democratic candidate? Of course not. Only in Israel, “anyone but Bibi” voters from the Zionist left intend to vote for right-wingers. Is there a greater case of collective suicide and losing their path? Surprise, there sure is!**
- **But For what does Israel’s center-left camp need, in view of its horrifying collapse? More splinter parties within the camp, obviously! How did we fools not figure that out before? The self-destructive impulse has not only prevented natural mergers that could likely stop the avalanche, but besides this stupid intransigence, there is another suicidal aspect that takes the form of laying countless eggs of tiny parties. If, God forbid, they insist on running until the end, they will further erode the bleeding entity called the center-left. The first to commit suicide in the left-wing camp was Ofer Shelah, an intelligent politician with high parliamentary capabilities who in the recent past saw a flattering poll. He forgot that the limited esteem and popularity that he won were the result of years of patronage from a politician who had already proven that he had the X factor and political stability: Yair Lapid. This column was finished last night only after tensely anticipating a dramatic announcement that he had promised to deliver.**

- **On Facebook, with several minutes of an empty screen and sound in the left headphone only (long live shoddy gear), from the oblivion of zero seats, he called for a merger with Huldai, the Labor Party, and his Tnufa party. “Only a grouping like this will stop the panicked bolt to the right and will shape the next government,” he said, maintaining the same obliviousness that has become a lethal virus. He didn’t mention Meretz or Lapid, because why give up a personal grudge even at the bottom of the underworld? Gantz’s declaration yesterday came splendidly late, but it was sweeping and more practical. After all, he at least crosses the electoral threshold and has tangible assets to bring to a merger, which he has called for not as a luxury, but more as resuscitation with a defibrillator. And when Gantz talks about setting aside one’s ego, he’s also believable. We no longer suspect him of having an ego.**

## **Misplaced Adoration**

By Dani Dayan

- In the course of one of my visits to Israel while I was consul-general in New York, I shared with Prime Minister Netanyahu my concerns and reservations about the Israeli policy of excessive praise for Donald Trump the man, which went well beyond a show of gratitude for a pro-Israeli leader. I believed, and that is also what I told the prime minister, that the future price that we would pay for that policy once the Democratic Party regained power would be too high. Furthermore, I felt uncomfortable with and even embarrassed by the personal gestures towards the American president that were already being discussed, such as: the possibility of naming the future train station near the Temple Mount after him or the decision to establish Trump Heights on the Golan. However, in a later meeting I held with the prime minister during subsequent visit to Israel, I admitted to him that even if some of the excesses could and should have been avoided, the political benefits that had been reaped by Israel were far higher than I could have ever imagined.
- The decision to relocate the embassy to Jerusalem; the decision to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights; the decision to quit the nuclear agreement with Iran; Pompeo's public statement about the Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria; the assassination of Qasem Soleimani; the absolute support for Israel in international forums; the Abraham Accords with the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco—all of those retroactively justified the Israeli policy. We'll live with the price. The election of Joe Biden, who was the candidate most supportive of Israel among all of the potential Democratic candidates, downsizes that price in any event. In terms of Israel's coolly calculated interests, it is indisputable that the Israeli devotion to and sycophancy towards Donald Trump paid off.
- Netanyahu, whose first meeting with Trump in the White House in February 2017 was not particularly successful, quickly bounced back, read the man in the Oval Office and acted accordingly. He was unsparing in his praise and compliments for the president and he refrained from criticizing him even when that would have been warranted. That policy bore fruit. However, in the past several weeks, and even more so in the past several days, the prism through which Israel- Trump relations will be judged had a sizeable weight added. The 45th president's refusal to recognize his loss of the election to his rival, Joe Biden, and his reckless speech on January 6, followed by the violent storming of the Capitol—has cast a dark shadow that will define that man's presidency for many years to come.
- Even before we know whether his second impeachment will result in his conviction by the Senate, we need to know this: Trump will be remembered in American history as a "tainted" president. We need to say honestly that Donald Trump's behavior since November 3 has come as no surprise. To the contrary, it was the almost natural outgrowth of his behavior in nearly all of his political career and possibly even his entire adult life. Therefore, even if Israel's policies towards him and his presidency were justified in all that pertains to the country's most vital interests, the Israeli public's

adoration of the man, coupled with its willful blindness to his moral failings is unfathomable. It is one thing to be grateful to him and to be pleased with his policies; it is entirely something else to admire the man.

- That is the reason why as soon as I was freed from my diplomatic fetters as a public servant of the State of Israel and before the most recent chain of events, I said that as an Israeli I would have liked to see Trump win but if I were an American, I would have voted against him. Donald Trump was a diplomatic miracle for the State of Israel, but at the same time he was from the first moment a train wreck for American democracy and for its political culture. As far as the diplomatic achievements that have been chalked up in the past four years, as is the case any time a new administration is sworn into office—especially when the governing party is replaced—some of them are likely to be reviewed and others will remain unchanged. At the same time, and without making any gratuitous public statements, we would do well to come up with a more appropriate name for the train station outside the Temple Mount.