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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

January 4, 2021

Ynet News

Prosecutors File Revised Indictment Against PM

Prosecutors released an amended indictment against Prime Minister Netanyahu removing any mention of his family in a corruption charge in which he is accused of trading favors with a powerful media mogul. Netanyahu has been charged with fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes in three corruption cases. One of them alleges that Netanyahu promoted regulations worth hundreds of millions of dollars to the owner of the Bezeq telecom company in exchange for positive coverage on its popular Walla news site. In response to a request from Netanyahu's lawyers for more details, prosecutors released a letter alleging there had been 315 incidents of Walla being requested to make its coverage more favorable for Netanyahu. [See also "Amended Indictment Filed Against Netanyahu, Detailing 200+ Demands for Coverage" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Times of Israel

Sa'Ar: Won't Agree to Power-Sharing Coalition with PM

New Hope party leader Gideon Sa'ar said that he would not agree to join a power-sharing government with Netanyahu, whose Likud party he recently left to form his new faction. Sa'ar, a longtime internal rival of the premier, has previously vowed not to enter a government headed by Netanyahu. Netanyahu has widely been accused of intentionally violating a power-sharing agreement with Defense Minister [Benny Gantz](#) by promising him the premiership after 1.5 years without any intention of keeping the promise. Support for Gantz and his Blue & White party has plummeted since he agreed to the deal with Netanyahu. Netanyahu's treatment of Gantz makes it unlikely that any other rivals will enter into a similar arrangement following the next election. [See also "Michaeli, Shmuli Likely to Face off for Labor Leader" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Times of Israel

PM Wants to Break Joint List's Monopoly on Arab Vote

Following a number of high-profile [visits](#) to Arab Israeli towns and reports that his Likud party is planning to campaign heavily for Arab votes in the coming election, Netanyahu said that he hopes Arab Israelis will cast a ballot for him. The new messaging marks a shift in tone by Netanyahu, whose Likud has campaigned in the past on unfounded claims of electoral fraud in Arab communities. He has repeatedly demonized Arab lawmakers in the Knesset and gained global notoriety for attempting to spur his supporters to go vote by warning them on election day 2015 that "Arab voters are heading to the polling stations in droves." A number of Netanyahu's political rivals hit out at the premier following the leaks of his comments to the Likud secretariat. [Joint List](#) leader Ayman Odeh accused Netanyahu of insulting Arab voters' intelligence. [See also "Likud Set to Reserve Election-Slate Spot for Arab-Israeli School Principal" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Reuters

Israel Dismisses Iran Charge It Seeks to Trick US into War

An Israeli official dismissed as “nonsense” an allegation by the Iranian foreign minister that Israel was trying to trick the US into waging war on Iran. It was Israel that needed to be on alert for possible Iranian strikes on the one-year anniversary of the assassination of Tehran’s top general, Qassem Soleimani, in a US drone strike in Iraq, Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz said on Kan radio. Washington blames Iran-backed militia for regular rocket attacks on US facilities in Iraq, including near the US embassy. No known Iran-backed groups have claimed responsibility. Foreign Minister Mohammad [Javad Zarif](#) said on Twitter: “New intelligence from Iraq indicate that Israeli agent-provocateurs are plotting attacks against Americans — putting an outgoing President Trump in a bind with a fake casus belli.” [See also “Report: UAE Foils Iranian Attack in Dubai on Anniversary of Soleimani Killing” \(I24 News\)](#)

I24 News

Israel Delivers Shipment of Iron Dome Batteries to US Army

Israel completed over the weekend the second delivery of two Iron Dome Defense System batteries to the US Army, the Defense Ministry said in a statement. In August 2019, the US and Israel signed an agreement for the procurement of two Iron Dome Defense System batteries. The first battery was delivered in September and is already undergoing a process of implementation in the US. The second battery was delivered in accordance with the agreement and project schedule. Israel’s interim Defense Minister Gantz said that delivering the “Iron Dome to the US Army once again demonstrates the close relations between the Israel Ministry of Defense and the US Department of Defense, the effectiveness of the system against various threats, and the excellent technological capabilities of Israeli industries.” [See also “Mossad Chiefs: Iran May Avenge Soleimani Killing After Biden Inauguration” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

10 Injured in Explosion Near Lebanon-Syria Border

Some 10 people were injured after explosions were reported at a gas storage warehouse in the town of Al-Qasr in northeastern Lebanon near the Lebanese-Syrian border, according to Lebanese media. Local reports indicated that the gas storage warehouse is used by smugglers. It is unclear what caused the explosion. The explosion occurred while Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan [Nasrallah](#) was speaking to mark the anniversary of the assassination of former IRGC Quds Force commander Qassam Soleimani. During the speech, Nasrallah stated that Hezbollah was “the only one capable of protecting Lebanon’s oil wealth thanks to its weapons and Iranian and Syrian support.” Intense flights of IDF aircraft were reported by Lebanese media over southern and central Lebanon throughout the afternoon and evening, including when the explosion occurred. Hezbollah has been accused of smuggling goods and dollars from Lebanon into Syria and harming the Lebanese economy, as well as smuggling weapons from Syria into Lebanon. According to Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, the warehouse where the explosion took place on Sunday is owned by a person who is close with Hezbollah. [See also “Gulf Reconciliation: Impact and Implications for Israel” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Gantz Favors Buying One More F-35 Squadron for Now

Defense Minister Gantz said that he wants the country to buy a third squadron of stealth F-35 warplanes from the US, and that he hoped a deal could be clinched before President Trump steps down on Jan. 20. Israel has been in talks with Washington on how to preserve its military advantage after the Trump administration approved a possible F-35 sale to the UAE. The plane was previously available only to Israel in the region. Defense officials have said the two squadrons already ordered by Israel consist of 50 planes. "I would buy another F-35 squadron and then examine what to do with the balance - continuing to expand the F-35 (procurement), going for F-15s?" Asked if Israel might complete a defense procurement deal with the US before Trump steps down, he said: "I hope so. I think the defense budget needs to be handled properly, to be safeguarded. It is a kind of active insurance policy."

Palestine Monetary Authority Governor Quits Abruptly

President Mahmoud Abbas has accepted the sudden resignation of Azzam Shawwa, the governor of the Palestine Monetary Authority (PMA) – the Palestinian Authority’s Ramallah-based emerging central bank. Abbas assigned Shawwa’s duties to Dr. Firas Melhem, a member of the PMA’s board of directors. Melhem led the Rule of Law team at the east Jerusalem-based office of the Middle East Quartet, focusing on justice and security, for more than four years, was general manager of the Palestinian Al-Quds Bank, and was chair of the Association of Banks in Palestine. Both the PMA and banks operating in the West Bank have been facing tremendous pressure, after the Israeli Defense Ministry’s Office of the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) in May ordered the banks to freeze accounts held by the families of security prisoners in Israeli jails and of those killed in clashes with Israel, in order to prevent the PA from paying them stipends. Some banks have already frozen some of these accounts, generating a wave of anger among Palestinians. Israel has long objected to the PA’s payments to the families of prisoners held in its jails, saying they encourage terrorism. Palestinians view the stipends as social assistance for those living under military occupation. [See also “France Hands \\$10 Million Grant to Pro-Bds Palestinian NGO” \(I24 News\)](#)

Social Engineering and Public Perception

By Afif Abu Much

- **“We made four peace agreements in four months, we’ve made peace for peace,”** wrote Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu on Twitter following the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and Morocco. Netanyahu underscored the message that this was **“real peace,” “peace with mutual respect,” “peace from strength”** and **“peace from peace.”** Those are the same mantras and slogans that he used in the past when normalization agreements were announced and signed with the UAE and Bahrain, as well as the normalization agreement that is supposed to be signed upon the conclusion of negotiations between Israel and Sudan. And that is without getting into the question of whether the agreement with Morocco can accurately be called a **“peace agreement”** given the fact that the issue at hand is a resumption of the relations between the countries. Israel and Morocco had already had open and covert relations over the years, and full diplomatic relations were established between the two countries after the Oslo Accords were signed, It was only in 2000 that Morocco decided to sever its relations with Israel because of the second Intifada. Furthermore, the agreements with the UAE, Bahrain and Sudan were born in the wake of deals that were signed between the US and the countries that established relations with Israel, and they were not the outcome of direct negotiations.
- **No one disputes that those four agreements are excellent news that qualify as an historic achievement, given that relations were established with Arab countries that, with the exception of Morocco, had not maintained open diplomatic relations with Israel before. However, despite the sense of euphoria that the prime minister and his inner circle routinely make sure to broadcast, one has to ask why he insists on calling agreements to establish relations “peace agreements.”** After all, the countries in question were not defined as enemy countries; none of them share a border with Israel; and—as opposed to Egypt and Jordan, for example—none had ever fought a war with Israel.
- **Did anyone in Israel define the establishment of relations with the various countries in Europe “peace agreements?”** Even the establishment of diplomatic relations with Germany in the 1960s was never defined by anyone here as a **“peace agreement,”** despite the fraught history between the two countries. With that being the case, it is puzzling why Netanyahu and his inner circle have insisted on describing the establishment of relations with Arab countries that never fought Israel **“peace agreements,”** but describe the same developments with other countries, as Netanyahu did when he welcomed the establishment of relations with Bhutan, as mere diplomatic relations. The explanation is that this is part of a broader and deliberate social engineering effort by the prime minister against the citizens of Israel, in the context of which it is important for him to have anything and everything that is Arab to be associated with being the **“enemy,”** even if that Arab never ever fought against the State of Israel.

- **If we ignore for a moment Netanyahu’s “surprise visits” to Tira and Umm el-Fahm this past weekend, we will reach the conclusion that in order to create the automatic thinking among the public that any Arab individual or thing is an enemy, the prime minister had no qualms about launching an unprecedented delegitimization campaign against the Arab citizens of Israel with a spate of anti-Arab legislation, the most prominent example of which is without doubt the nation-state law. And that is without even mentioning the way he rendered the Arab vote in the last election illegitimate, or his remarks in the 2015 election about how “the Arab voters are going in droves to the polling stations,” planting fear of the Arabs in the Jewish public’s hearts. Everything leads to just one obvious conclusion: a clear social engineering effort is underway here against Arabs, regardless of whether they are Arabs from around the world or in Israel.**

The Contract that was Breached

By Nahum Barnea

- In the final week of 2020 the number of people who were registered as unemployed with the Employment Service stood at 753,425, which is just over three-quarters of a million people. That statistic, as is often the case with economic statistics, simultaneously embodies a troubling truth and a lie. The troubling truth is that the pandemic has put Israel into a deep recession; it has curtailed the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people; it has wiped out business ventures, plans and dreams; and it has precipitated personal and familial crises. Entire sectors have been eliminated. The lie is that a large part of the people who are registered as being unemployed aren't really unemployed. They have taken to accepting the coronavirus stipend that is paid to them by the state and they have also taken to working off the books as well. The government shut its eyes and let out a sigh of relief: the combination of the governmental stipends and the undocumented job market made the unemployed less inclined to demonstrate and it softened the financial blow that they were dealt. Their financial problems are no longer on the political agenda. Some of the formally unemployed people have reported actually having a larger income. But they are breaking the law, they aren't making any pension contributions and they have no job security. Nevertheless, that arrangement appears to be working.
- That state of affairs has created a paradox: employers who need workers, usually for low-paying jobs, say that they have been unable to find people who are willing to work. On the one hand you've got three-quarters of a million jobless Israelis and, on the other hand, you've got a shortage of workers. Unbelievable? Of course it's believable. We might have been spared this blight had Finance Minister Yisrael Katz adopted the German method, which issued the governmental stipends via the employers. That would have preserved the relationship between the worker and his or her place of employment, and the workers wouldn't have ended up in the streets. But even that may not have helped. The flourishing black job market has set Israel a generation or two back, restoring it to the Israel that existed prior to the tax invoice era. It took many years to get a large part of Israeli society accustomed to working in an orderly manner under proper supervision; it took years to make the sound of the cash register clanging in a store become a self-evident must. Norms are quick to erode; it is going to take years to rebuild them. The coronavirus put the contract that exists between the government and the citizen to a difficult test. The contract can be described in the following terms: I, the citizen, will elect you; I will grant you tremendous power over matters of life and death; I will serve in the army and I will pay my taxes. You will guarantee me my security, my welfare and my children's future. Did the Israeli government meet its obligations in the contract during the coronavirus crisis? Yes and no. Yes, because it took the pandemic seriously and invested time and resources in coping with it. No, because the decision-making process was sullied by political and personal interests and because the government ultimately lost the public's confidence.

- The third lockdown puts both sides of that coin on full display. On the one hand, there is the sense of pride thanks to the vaccines that have arrived, the successful acquisition efforts that were pursued by the prime minister and the high-quality and universal service that is provided by our HMOs. On the other hand, the public has defied the restrictions that were imposed by the government. Netanyahu has blamed his fellow politicians from the cabinet and the Knesset for the lockdown's collapse. But that is fake news; it's election propaganda. The lockdown's collapse was caused by the citizens. They came to the conclusion that the government wasn't working for them, and they reacted accordingly.
- Netanyahu is preoccupied with making the sale. A short and full lockdown would have provided him with sufficiently impressive numbers to show the public. But he can't impose a full-scale lockdown. The Haredi sector has refused to shut its schools. There is no way of forcing it to do so and, even if there were—Netanyahu can't afford to fight with the Haredi public. When the infection rate in the Haredi city of Beitar Illit is sky high and the infection rate in Tel Aviv is negligible, there is no way he can lock down Tel Aviv and leave Beitar Illit open. There are voters in Tel Aviv too.
- It's impossible to persuade the public that decisions are being made exclusively for germane reasons when the prime minister immediately subordinates them to a public relations campaign. The politicization of the coronavirus was problematic from day-one. But the damage that that politicization causes in the run-up to an election is twice as high. It isn't easy to manage a crisis under conditions of uncertainty, but the tendency to delay, to flipflop, to boast, to make personal accusations and all of the other characteristics of the government's handling of other issues as well only served to erode public confidence further. The straw that finally broke the camel's back was the latest idea that was raised by Health Ministry Deputy Director General Professor Itamar Grotto: to postpone administering the second dose of the vaccine.
- We will probably be able to begin to resume normal life, more or less, in April or May. The economy will begin to bounce back. But will the crisis of confidence between the government and the citizen disappear as quickly? I'm not so sure. The lesson that the public learned from the coronavirus is complex. On the one hand, it has learned that the coronavirus is like a war: it can't be won without massive governmental intervention. On the other hand, it has also learned there is no reason for us to comply with the political establishment's every whim. The cabinet ministers look out for themselves at least as much as they do for the citizens. Respect, suspect and replace—that is the conclusion.