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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

January 5, 2021

Jerusalem Post

Four Parties Conspire Against Netanyahu with Vote Deals

In a sign of possible cooperation, four parties whose leaders oppose Netanyahu remaining prime minister took steps together that could help bring him down. Yamina head Naftali [Bennett](#) and New Hope's Gideon Sa'ar signed a surplus-vote sharing agreement between their two parties. Yesh Atid and Yisrael Beytenu leaders signed a similar deal. The four parties have made it harder for Likud, which may lose seats, because no party running will want to aid Netanyahu. Surplus-vote sharing agreements enable votes for one party beyond what is needed for a mandate to move to another and not be wasted. The method in calculating surplus votes is called the Bader-Ofer Law, after Gahal MK Yohanan Bader and Alignment MK Avraham Ofer who proposed it in 1973. There has been speculation that New Hope and Yamina will end up running together. [See also "Meretz Unveils New Arab Woman Candidate" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Times of Israel

Former Mossad Chief to Launch Retirees Political Party

Former head of the Mossad Danny Yatom is expected to launch a new retirees party. Similar to the former "Pensioners of Israel" party, which won 7 seats in the 2006 elections but failed to pass the electoral threshold in 2009 and 2013 and was dismantled during the 2015 elections, Yatom's party will focus on elderly affairs. The party is already in the middle of registration procedures, according to Army Radio. After a 30-year career in the IDF, peaking as the head of the Central Command, Yatom served as military secretary, first under prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and then, when Rabin was murdered, under Shimon Peres. [See also "Israeli Left Mourns Ashkenazi's Departure as Wasted Chance" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Settlers Say They, Not Arabs Are Netanyahu's Base

Settlers reminded [Netanyahu](#) that they, and not the Israeli-Arabs, were his electoral base as they embarked on a hunger strike to protest the lack of West Bank settler outpost authorization. The Yesha Council leadership supports the hunger strike but has not joined it. It did however hold a joint event with the Forum to mark its launch and to call on Netanyahu to act. Settlers have charged that Netanyahu is more concerned with courting Arabs than supporting his base. Regional Cooperation Minister Ofir Akunis said that soon Israel could be facing a diplomatic battle on and that in advance of that battle it was impotent to regular these communities. In a nod to the known policies of incoming President-elect Joe Biden who supports a two-state resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Akunis said that Israel could soon be dealing with the resurrection of Palestinian statehood and two states. [See also "PM Hoping for Election Boost From Morocco's King Mohammed" \(Ynet News\)](#)

PM Warns Iran After It Upgrades Uranium Enrichment

Netanyahu warned [Iran](#) after it said it had begun to boost uranium enrichment in the underground facility at Fordo, saying it "cannot be explained in any way other than the continuation of realizing its goal to develop a military nuclear program." "Israel will not allow Iran to manufacture a nuclear weapon," he added. Tehran has long maintained its nuclear program is peaceful, but Israel has dismissed that claim. Iran's move, which will see uranium being enriched to 20% purity, comes after its parliament passed a bill, later approved by a constitutional watchdog, aimed at hiking enrichment to pressure Europe into providing sanctions relief. It also serves as pressure ahead of the inauguration of Joe Biden, who has said he is willing to re-enter the nuclear deal. Iran informed the International Atomic Energy Agency that it planned to take the step. [See also "Iranian Army Announces 'Large-Scale' Drone Exercise" \(I24 News\)](#)

South Korean-Flagged Tanker Seized by Iran

Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps seized a South Korean-flagged tanker in Gulf waters and detained its crew, Iranian media said, amid tensions between Tehran and Seoul over Iranian funds frozen in South Korean banks due to US sanctions. Seoul confirmed the seizure of a South Korean chemical tanker by Iranian authorities in the waters off Oman and demanded its immediate release. Several Iranian media outlets, including state TV, said the Guards navy captured the vessel for polluting the Gulf with chemicals. The semi-official Tasnim news agency published pictures showing the Guards' speed boats escorting the tanker HANKUK CHEMI. It said the vessel's detained crew members included nationals of South Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam and Myanmar. Iran's state TV said the tanker was being held at Iran's Bandar Abbas port city. The ship had 20 crew members, according to South Korea's foreign ministry. The State Department called for Iran to release the tanker immediately. [See also "South Korea Dispatches Anti-Piracy Unit After Iran Seizes Oil Tanker" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Saudi Arabia Agrees to Open Airspace, Border to Qatar

[Saudi Arabia](#) has agreed to open its borders with Qatar, Kuwait's top diplomat said, in a major development in the rift between the two Gulf states. Kuwait's Foreign Minister announced the agreement to open the airspace and land and sea borders between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In 2017, Saudi Arabia and its allies closed their borders to Qatar. They alleged that Qatar was funding terrorism, which Qatar denied. Qatar in turn mounted legal challenges to the quartet's actions. The conflict also related to Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its relatively friendly relations with Iran. While the Kuwaiti announcement does not spell an end to the Gulf rift, one of Qatar's pre-conditions to ending the dispute was the lifting of the border closures, Qatari state-owned Al Jazeera reported. The Gulf Cooperation Council, in which both Riyadh and Doha participate, will meet tomorrow in Saudi Arabia. The agreement will be welcome news in [Washington](#). [See also "Gulf States Reach Deal to End Three-Year-Old Qatar Boycott, Kuwait Announces" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

PA Arrests Suspects in E. Jerusalem, Hands Them to Israel

The Palestinian Authority (PA) has reportedly handed over to Israel four suspects arrested in connection with a shootout in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Kafr Aqab that left three Palestinian residents dead and eight wounded. Israel officially bans the PA from operating inside the Jerusalem boundary and regularly cracks down on its activities in the capital. Such activities, therefore, were highly unusual, with dozens of officers of the Palestinian security forces entering Kafr Aqab in armored jeeps before fanning out along the neighborhood's main thoroughfare. Kafr Aqab, a bustling Palestinian neighborhood, has been separated from the rest of Jerusalem since 2005 by the security barrier. The neighborhood's Palestinian residents have long argued that the city fails to provide even basic municipal services to residents beyond the wall. The Israel Police rarely operates beyond the security barrier, and then only with approval from the IDF. The lack of police presence has given Kafr Aqab a reputation for lawlessness and anarchy. [See also "Palestinians Plotted with Jerusalem Resident to Steal From Yad Vashem" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Israel and Greece Set to Sign Expansive Defense Deal

Israel and Greece are set to sign a wide-ranging security agreement, which includes the procurement of ten M-346 (Lavi) aircraft and the establishment of a flight school. According to a Defense Ministry statement that was released on Tuesday, the Greek government approved the deal ahead of the signing. The agreement, which will be signed by both defense ministries, includes the establishment and operation of a flight school for the Hellenic Air Force, by Elbit Systems. It also includes the maintenance of T-6 aircraft (Efroni), as well as the provision of simulators, training, and logistic support. The G-to-G agreement amounts to around \$1.68b and will span over 20 years, the defense ministry said. Defense Minister Benny Gantz said ahead of the expected signing that "this agreement reflects the excellent and developing relations we have with Greece. The Defense Ministry said it participated in an international tender for this project, and its winning bid was approved by the Greek government. It added that as part of the agreement, the flight school will be built and maintained by Elbit systems. This is said to be the largest defense procurement agreement between the two countries to date, and the approval from Athens enables the parties to move forward in the negotiations leading to the signing of a contract. [See also "Israel-Europe Ties Improving, Warming up to Abraham Accords" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Don't Explain to Us

By Amjad Shabita

- Like the swallow that is a harbinger of spring, the commentators who assert that the MKs on the Joint List do not truly represent the Arab public are the harbingers of a new election. It seems to make no difference how many achievements the MKs actually deliver, there will always be commentators who will volunteer to explain to the Arab citizens what our real interests are, and who is really working on our behalf. I personally happen to be highly critical of some of the Arab MKs, but it is important to dispense with the lies. In the last Knesset, the Joint List made real progress on the issue of construction, the war on crime and on a major economic program for Arab society. If those achievements fail to speak for themselves, we can grade their parliamentary activity by simply looking at the numbers.
- The Arab MKs filed twice the number of queries to the various ministries than the MKs from the other parties, and the absolute majority of those queries pertained to discrimination against Arab citizens. In practice, more than 97% of the bills that were introduced by the Arab MKs in the last Knesset were focused on improving the lives of the Arab citizens and the citizens at large, and just three percent of the bills pertained to the occupation of the territories—even though doing that is not only their right but their duty as members of the Palestinian people and as leaders who are committed to advancing the causes of justice and peace. Naturally, advancing the cause of peace is also a direct interest of ours that will improve our lives as Israeli citizens.
- And our lives need improving. Just this past year we lost 112 brothers and sisters to crime and violence in Arab society. There isn't an Arab family that hasn't bled or a community that hasn't lost one of its sons or daughters. Those numbers have only been on the rise in the past decade, as has the civil protest that has demanded to guarantee the [Arab citizen's] right to life and safety. Arab society in its entirety has enlisted to fight the crime organizations and to demand that the law enforcement agencies act to confiscate the hundreds of thousands of guns that are in our neighborhoods. The fight to stamp out crime is profoundly linked to the fight for civil equality.
- The crime organizations have taken over our streets because our communities are the country's backyard. The Arab citizens are far from the police's eye and far from the government's heart [an allusion to the Hebrew version of "out of sight out of mind," which is "far from the eye, far from the heart"]. Despite all that, yesterday Ben-Dror Yemini argued that the real problem is that we are addicted to honor. Yemini has confused our demand for dignity as equal human beings with the misnomer, "family honor killing." That exploitation unmasks the failure [by Yemini] to understand the deep problems that are created by the blight of crime and violence. We have but one decisive answer to any offer of provisional equality: we will never concede our own identity in exchange for equality.

- **If we bow our heads to the discrimination that facilitates crime, the violence will never. Did disappear. If we hold our tongues in the face of incitement, equality will continue to elude us. Because if we surrender to racism, the situation will only grow worse. Our right to personal safety does not derive from the fact that we serve the political interests of either the right or the left, but from our citizenship in this country, our indigenusness in this land, and the fact that we are all equal human beings.**

Vaccines and Lockdowns

By Nadav Eyal

- Israel has remained mired in an internal squabble while the coronavirus outbreak has continued to grow. Yes, it's true that the numbers may begin to drop a little bit by the weekend, but that does not appear to be likely at present. Yes, it may prove to be true that the British variant isn't more contagious and that the scientists in London are mistaken, but that is too large a gamble to take. All of the professionals in the Health Ministry and the hospitals, as well as the scientists who advise the coronavirus cabinet, have recommended imposing additional restrictions. In their rosiest dreams they would like to see a ban imposed on meetings among ten people. That is the professional opinion of experts from the Hebrew University; that is also the professional opinion of the team of experts advising the coronavirus cabinet headed by Professor Ran Balicer. Imposing a ban of that kind would be more effective than shutting schools and doing so is certainly more critical than prohibiting basketball practice and tennis lessons. Limiting meetings to up to six people at most is the most effective way to help bring down the infection rate, but everyone knows that that is never going to happen. Why? Because of the minyan [the Jewish prayer quorum of ten men]. That's the truth.
- What does that leave? Schools. They are gradually being shut down in any event because of local coronavirus outbreaks. Schools are a venue for large gatherings. A debate has been raging around the world as to the exact contribution that schoolchildren have made to outbreaks within the community. According to Israeli data, they do not contribute much, but the Europeans' experience in the past few months has shown that children from the higher grades in elementary schools through high school all significantly facilitate the spread of infection. It all depends on how people behave. Israel has two school systems—an independent system and a state school system.
- The likelihood of one student infecting another in the independent school system is 3.5%, whereas in the state school system it is 1.5%. Why? Health Ministry officials said that the reason is that in Haredi schools, where myths about herd immunity are popular, the spread of infection is taken much more in stride, and they are less meticulous about quarantining people. That has produced a significant disparity in the infection rates in the two school systems that in some cases, operate in the same cities simultaneously. Keeping schools open is an important value and it is important emotionally. Given the fact that children barely become sick as a result of the coronavirus, keeping schools open is the logical choice for other reasons as well. Having said that, if the result of the outbreaks is that schools keep getting shut down in any event, then we haven't accomplished anything anyway [by keeping them open in principle]. Meanwhile, the first cracks are beginning to show in the vaccination campaign. It is still being executed exceptionally well. The problem is that the HMOs and the hospitals have not been able to reach all of the at-risk population groups, and politics and populism have begun to impact the decision-making processes.

- **A good example of that could be found in the decision that was made yesterday by Ichilov Hospital and the Tel Aviv municipality in defiance of the Health Ministry's guidelines to vaccinate all members of the teaching staff in the city, as well as the staff members who provide after-school activities [in the schools] and staff members at private (!) daycare centers. Why was a 22-year-old woman who works in a private daycare center eligible for a vaccine yesterday while a diabetic and overweight 49-year-old man was ineligible, according to Health Ministry's guidelines? And is there any way we can fail to view the fawning post that was written by the Tel Aviv municipality about Ichilov Hospital Director General Professor Ronni Gamzu (the hospital's workers are all municipal employees, incidentally) and Teachers Association Chairwoman Yafa Ben David—in the context of Ron Huldai's current election campaign? Teachers who are in a classroom with dozens of students should be vaccinated.**
- **That would be a reasonable decision. But that is precisely the reason why the Health Ministry formed a prioritization committee, and that committee should be the one to decide. The vaccines don't belong to any particular local council or municipality; they don't belong to any particular hospital or HMO. Here is a fact: less than half of the people over the age of 80, which is the group that has been hit hardest by the coronavirus, have been vaccinated to date. The authorities in the municipalities, the HMOs and the hospital need to apply themselves to finding ways to reach those people, before they devote more time to writing viral Facebook posts. The Health Ministry has been displaying weakness these past few days, and some of the HMOs and municipalities have exploited that to their own ends. If we want Israel's famous "organized ruckus" to work, it needs to be organized and not just a ruckus.**