



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

January 6 2021

Times of Israel

Gantz Considering Alliance with Hard-Right Yamina

Blue & White chief Benny Gantz is considering joining his faction with Naftali Bennett's national-religious Yamina party to form an alliance for the coming elections, according to Channel 12. The report drew cries of false news from Blue & White, scorn from Prime Minister Netanyahu's Likud party and a cryptic response from Yamina that didn't reject the notion. Gantz's centrist party has been hemorrhaging member lawmakers ever since the Knesset dissolved and new elections were called near the end of last month. A recent poll predicted the party would not even muster enough votes in the election to enter the Knesset. Bennett, who said he was aiming to become prime minister, has not ruled out aligning with Gantz, the report said, noting that Bennett is caught in an internal party spat with far-right National Union faction. [See also "Yamina Set to Split as Bennett, Smotrich Fail to Bridge Differences" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Ron Huldai Promises Half of His Party's Mks Will Be Women

Half of the MKs in the Israelis party of Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai will be women, he announced with four women who will be on his list. The list will include University of Washington Prof. Karine Nahon, former Blue & White MK Einav Kabla, educator Keren Tal and social activist Adi Tsabari. In a message to Blue & White voters, Huldai said "your party leader made a mistake, not you" and that his party should be their new home. Blue & White responded that the party's path "prevented annexation, closing down courts and harming democracy during a health and socioeconomic crisis," while "the Israelis party's path prevents Tel Aviv from having a full-time mayor." Huldai also added former deputy chief of staff Gen. Dan Harel to run with his party. Harel was head of Southern Command during the Gaza Strip withdrawal and later director-general of the Defense Ministry.

Ynet News

Ministers Approve Full Lockdown Starting Thursday

After long deliberations, ministers voted to tighten the lockdown, shuttering schools and nonessential businesses, starting Thursday for 2 weeks. As part of the new measures, gatherings will be limited to five people indoors and ten people outdoors, only essential workers will be allowed to leave for work, and all professional sports activities will be canceled. Israelis will still be prohibited from venturing more than one 0.6 miles from home or stay at other households. Prime Minister Netanyahu told ministers that he now supports a Health Ministry request for the proposed tighter lockdown to start from Thursday and not Friday later as he originally suggested. Israel has already been already in its third lockdown for more than a week. [See also "Netanyahu Re-Election Hopes Hinge on Vaccination Campaign" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Iran Adds 1,000 Centrifuges as US Slaps on New Sanctions

After Iran confirmed that it has stepped up its uranium enrichment in breach of the 2015 nuclear deal, the head of Iran's atomic agency said the Islamic Republic is in the process of installing 1,000 new centrifuges to help increase production. One thousand centrifuges are being installed inside the country," Ali Akbar Salehi said, according to the semi-official Fars News Agency. Salehi also said that Iran had increased its supply of yellowcake, a precursor to enriched uranium, eight-fold in the past two years. Yellowcake is a uranium concentrate in powder form and an early step in uranium processing. It is produced by mining uranium ore from rocks and separating the uranium from the rocks by bathing them in acid. The yellowcake can then be converted, enriched to raise its purity, and then used for weapons or energy production. [See also "Senior Hamas Official Describes Receiving \\$22m in Cash From Iran's Soleimani" \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

Bill by Algerian Lawmaker to Criminalize Peace with Israel

An Algerian lawmaker announced that she intends to submit a bill to parliament seeking to criminalize "the... promotion of normalization with the Zionist entity," referring to Israel, Algerian media outlets reported. In a message posted to her Facebook page, Amira Selim said that the bill aims to "prevent the promotion of normalization with the Zionist entity through mass media and social media, to the National People's Assembly." If the law is passed, an offender could be "punished by imprisonment from three to 10 years," and may have their professional accreditations rescinded as a punitive measure. Offenders may also be subject to a fine ranging from \$2,273-\$7,619. The penalty can be extended to 15 years and the fine doubled in the event of a repeat offense," Selim notes. The development comes as neighboring nation Morocco announced the resumption of its diplomatic relations with the Jewish state via a US-brokered normalization deal. [See also "Israel to Announce Two Temporary Missions in the UAE" \(Ynet News\)](#)

With a Public Embrace, Saudi Arabia & Qatar Restore Ties

Full ties have been restored between [Qatar](#) and the 4 nations that severed relations with Doha in a rift that began 3 years ago, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister said, after the parties signed new [agreements](#). Saudi state media said that de facto leader Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) met separately with Qatar's ruler Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, after the pair publicly embraced at the airport. Leaders of the six-member [GCC](#) signed two documents, the Al-Ula Declaration, named after the Saudi city and a final communique. MBS said that the Gulf states had inked an agreement that affirms "our Gulf, Arab and Islamic solidarity and stability." Saudi Arabia's decision to end the embargo not only underscored the kingdom's assertion of its heavyweight position among Arab states, but also its regional leadership, which has been challenged at times by the UAE's unilateral and politically shrewd moves. [See also "Qatar Showed Force Can Actually Bring Peace in the Middle East" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Amnesty Demand Israel Give Vaccine to Palestinians

Amnesty International demanded that Israel provide coronavirus vaccine doses to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, saying Jerusalem was obligated to do so under international law. The [Palestinian Authority](#) in the West Bank, which is home to some 2.8 million Palestinians, has not publicly asked for Israeli assistance in vaccine procurement and has said it is obtaining its vaccine doses through the UN. The Hamas terror group that rules the Gaza Strip, where about two million Palestinians live, is highly unlikely to publicly coordinate with Israel in any vaccination effort. But Britain-based rights group Amnesty said Israel needed to "stop ignoring its international obligations as an occupying power and immediately act to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are equally and fairly provided to Palestinians living under its occupation in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip." Under the terms of the Oslo Accords, however, the Palestinian Authority is responsible for the healthcare of its own population and has repeatedly said it is obtaining its own vaccines via the UN scheme. The Palestinian health ministry said that it expected to receive its first vaccine doses next month through the COVAX program for low and middle-income nations. [See also "Israeli Firm Helps Provide Gaza With Clean Water" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Times of Israel

New HFAC Head Looks to Resume US Aid to Palestinians

The new chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee said the US would look to resume aid to the Palestinians as he voiced hope for reviving a multilateral approach to the world under President-elect Joe Biden. In an interview, Representative Gregory Meeks also called for a fresh look at the Venezuelan crisis and vowed to use his role to press human rights concerns he said had been ignored under outgoing President Trump. Meeks said he would look to expand humanitarian aid including to the Palestinians after the staunchly pro-Israel Trump cut off nearly all funding to them, including contributions to the UN agency for Palestinian refugees. The Trump administration cut hundreds of millions of dollars in financial aid to the PA after relations between Ramallah and Washington soured over the White House's December 6, 2017, recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. The US has since cut all aid to the Palestinians, including to Israeli-Palestinian coexistence programs and six East Jerusalem hospitals. Israel has long pushed for the closure of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), arguing it helps perpetuate the conflict with the Palestinians. It criticizes its method of classifying Palestinian refugees since their descendants are also eligible for the status.

The Train Has Left the Station

By Smadar Peri

- It was fascinating to watch the meeting between Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad, Qatar ruler Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad, and his host, none other than the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman yesterday in Riyadh. One wore a jellabiya under a brown jacket, the other a black suit. The cameras did not miss a movement: From the moment the Qatari plane touched down to the warm embrace the Saudi prince made haste to give. Because hey, the whole world was watching, and the kingdom's acting ruler is trying hard to change his country's image. For three years, no Qatari foot has set down in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, the Persian Gulf or in Egypt. Each of those countries has a long list of scores to settle with the small emirates. Egypt's a-Sisi is furious about Qatar's support for his sworn enemy, the Muslim Brotherhood, and he has a litany of scores to settle over Qatar's "great" friendship with a-Sisi's great rival, Turkey. The UAE are following Qatar-Iran ties as closely as possible, with the latter threatening to carry out a terror attack in Abu Dhabi or Dubai. Bahrain, in with the Saudis, was forced yesterday to throw its list of demands for reconciliation [with Qatar] into the dustbin of history, at least for the time being.
- There was also another VIP there: Jarred Kushner, son-in-law and adviser to President Trump and his go-to man for many secret and open tasks. By last month there were initial signs of a process intended to prepare the Saudis for the new administration in Washington, with Biden less than supportive of goings-on inside the Kingdom. One can also conjecture that Trump and Kushner are also preparing, following the reconciliation, a large business project in the Persian Gulf. It was as if the Saudis' great dream—that Qatar would close down the Al-Jazeera network that is critical [of the Saudi regime] had simply been dropped. In the first stage, the land, air and sea borders between the countries opened. For Israel, which was wholly involved with the reconciliation process, this means that Qatar will soon be joining the list of new air destinations in the Gulf for Israel-based airlines and for Israeli tourists. Incidentally, having visited Qatar 15 times, I can say that it is worth it, especially the enormous mall with mini-gondolas floating between the stores.
- Back to the diplomatic story: When viewed with Israeli eyes, it is impossible to ignore two key figures in Doha, the Qatari capital, both of whom have the ear of Sheikh Tamim. One, former MK Azmi Bishara, who fled to Jordan and exiled himself to [Qatar], which offered him terrific conditions. On the other hand, Mohammed Al- Emadi, an experienced Qatari diplomat, who is not only tasked with maintaining the suitcases full of dollars that he distributes in Gaza, but also initiated secret ties with senior Israelis, who have praised his behavior. There are many dreams resting on the reconciliation in the Persian Gulf: Increasing the power of the Group of Seven emirates and countries in the Gulf before the new administration takes office in Washington and breathing life into the Arab League, in order to limit Turkey's influence [in the region]. Qatar, with its sparkling jellabiya, may not be clear precisely how long this reconciliation will last, but it is supposed to come

under the Saudi's warm embrace. Israel does not come out as a loser in all this. Who is really the winner in this story? No question about it: Jarred Kushner and his father-in-law, Trump. Politics now, business immediately afterwards.

Iran's Opportunity

By Alex Fishman

- **It unclear whether the Biden administration is already holding secret diplomatic negotiations with Iran behind the backs of the US' allies in the Middle East, as the Obama administration did in 2013. In the meantime, in the public sphere, the Iranians and Biden's people have been exchanging violent messages. And where is Israel in this whole story? It is on the eve of an election, enmired in a coronavirus crisis, with a paralyzed government and an economically exhausted society. Is the State of Israel at all capable of devoting attention and energy to the Iranian nuclear threat that has reappeared? Probably not. It is easier and more convenient to repress the threat and to accept the hypothesis that the Iranians are merely taking tactical measures for dealing with the future Biden administration in order to come to the negotiating table in possession of better cards so as to persuade the US to return to the nuclear agreement. When Iran announced on January 1 that it was accelerating its uranium enrichment to 20%, it probably believed it to be highly likely that doing so would not precipitate either an American or an Israeli attack. The real red line for a military attack on Iran is a renewal of the military nuclear program that pulls together all of the Iranian capabilities and assembles them inside a nuclear warhead.**
- **The Iranians, as far as anyone knows, aren't there. But no one knows with any certainty at which stage of things they are. Fakhrizadeh was assassinated to delay the nuclear program. As long as no clear-cut proof is in hand that the military program has been suspended, any change in Iran's race to achieve nuclear capability is viewed with extreme gravity by Israel. In December, when Iranian parliament approved the acceleration of the nuclear program, Israeli diplomacy should have charged ahead with every lever of pressure possible. But who in the world has time now to listen to Israel's complaints? And that is precisely what the Iranians are banking on right now. They have been working on this project for the past 30 years and have only been waiting for an opportunity in which the world might be too tired [to act to stop them] to build a bomb. It will then be too late for us.**
- **The Iranians began to operate in the Persian Gulf as of December 31 to stop the flow of fuel to the West. When Secretary of Defense Miller announced that the US was accelerating the process of its naval forces' deployment in the Persian Gulf, the Iranians reacted by holding military exercises, in which they displayed their UAV and cruise missile capabilities. The Iranians aren't fools. They aren't going to attack American targets so as not to give Trump a pretext for attacking. They have already begun to anticipate the Persian bazaar [i.e., the haggling negotiations] that they are going to conduct with Biden's group of people, the very same group that was party to and was committed to Obama's nuclear agreement. That is why they have begun to add phony issues, such as enriching uranium to 20%. They can subsequently concede those phony issues in exchange for things that are truly important to them. Israel needs to be ready on the day that Biden is sworn into office for the commencement of negotiations over a**

new nuclear agreement, negotiations in which it is liable to find itself kept out of the loop once again. Can we trust that a caretaker government on the eve of a new election will take a sufficiently firm stance in its talks with the new American administration?