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Israel and Middle East News Update

Thursday, January 7

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News Excerpts

January 7, 2021

Times of Israel

Lapid, Gantz 'Shocked, Horrified' by Violence at US Capitol

Opposition leader Yair Lapid said he was “deeply saddened and shocked” by the violence at the US Capitol after supporters of President Trump, egged on by the president himself, stormed the building. Defense Minister Benny Gantz said the images being broadcast from Washington “hurt the heart of anyone who believes in democracy.” “I never believed I would see such images from the world’s most powerful democracy,” Gantz said. “This is proof that before political rivalry, we must agree on the rules of the game: maintaining the rule of law, respect for the democratic process and respectful dialogue. I hope this horrific event will come to an end soon, without any casualties.” There was no response from Prime Minister [Netanyahu](#), several hours after the events began. [See also “Watching From Israel, Worrying for Our Ally, with Troubling Concerns of Our Own” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Netanyahu's Request to Postpone Next Hearing Denied

The Jerusalem District Court rejected Netanyahu’s request for postponing his January 13 hearing. The court said that although the prosecution had amended the indictment, because Netanyahu’s lawyers had a full year to study the original indictment and with the changes not being hugely substantive, there was no reason not to proceed. At the same time, the court took Attorney-General Avichai Mandelblit to task for failing to turn over original protocols and internal documents in which he approved the investigation into Netanyahu in 2016. Questions started to resurface about whether the impending stricter third lockdown would cause further delays. Next week’s hearing is to feature Netanyahu in person, and the Court is to set dates in February for hearing witnesses, the heart of the trial. However, the tightening of the third lockdown expected today has unleashed a war of words about whether the courts should stay open. [See also “How Vaccine Win Could Deliver Netanyahu Election” \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Meretz Cancels Party Primary

Meretz's governing council canceled the party's leadership race and primaries. The council approved Meretz leader Nitzan Horowitz's decision to reserve the fourth slot on the party's list for an Arab woman, Ghaida Rinawie Zoabi, who is a peace activist and the founding Executive Director of Injaz Center for Professional Arab Local Governance. The proposal won 79% of the votes at the convention. The Ethiopian immigrant candidate, Mehereta Baruch-Ron, quit, saying that Meretz had changed its face and distanced itself from its values by becoming a Jewish-Arab party that is too focused on the conflict. She warned that it was a serious mistake. [See also “Poll Suggests Bennett Would Benefit From Splitting with National Union” \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

IDF Deploys Iron Dome System to Eilat to Combat Threat

The IDF deployed the Iron Dome missile defense system in Eilat, the country's southernmost city, according to Israeli media reports. The decision was taken to attempt to give cover to twin threats; the presence of terrorist cells located in the Egyptian Sinai, and also because of Iranian-backed Houthi militias located in [Yemen](#). The latter could be used by Iran as a base for launching missiles towards the seaside resort, in order to avenge the assassination of nuclear physicist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, assassinated at the end of November in Iran, but also to avenge the targeted killing of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force Gen. Qasem Soleimani, in an American drone strike at Baghdad airport last year. [See also "Rafael Completes Delivery of Trophy Tank Protection Systems to US Army" \(I24 News\)](#)

Sudan Joins Abraham Accords to Recognize Israel

Sudan's Justice Minister Nasredeen Abdulbari signed an agreement with US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin agreeing to normalize ties with Israel as part of the Trump administration's Abraham Accords initiative. The deal caps months of negotiations between the Trump administration and Sudan's interim government, which came into office following the ouster of dictator Omar al-Bashir following mass protests in 2019. Following an agreement last year where the US would remove Sudan from its state sponsors of terror list in exchange for payments to settle terror victims' claims, Trump administration officials added an additional request in October: that Khartoum normalize relations with Israel. Hamdok balked. As part of the talks, Sudanese leaders had also requested a restoration of their Sudan's sovereign immunity from future terror lawsuits in US courts. Congress enshrined that but carved out an exception for an ongoing lawsuit by family members of victims of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. [See also "With Sudan Signing Abraham Accords, Israel Tightens Grip in Africa, Red Sea Basin" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Syria TV: Israel Air Strikes Target Damascus Area

Israel struck targets in southern Syria in the third such attack in nearly 10 days, state TV reported as military defectors said the missiles targeted Iranian Revolutionary Guard bases. A military spokesman said missiles flying over the Golan Heights targeted several locations and air defenses downed several missiles. Live coverage showed a multi-story building on fire. The bases in eastern, central and southern Syria which Israel had hit in recent months are believed to have a strong presence of Iranian-backed militias, according to intelligence sources and military defectors familiar with the locations. Western intelligence sources say Israel's stepped up strikes on Syria in the last few months are part of a shadow war approved by the US and part of the anti-Iran policy that has undermined in the last two years Iran's extensive military power without triggering a major increase in hostilities. [See also "Syria Says Israeli Airstrikes Hit Sites Around Damascus" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Israel Sends PA Vaccines for ‘Humanitarian Cases’

Israel sent dozens of vaccines to the Palestinian Authority (PA), a PA official confirmed. The small number of vaccines were transferred to the PA and have yet to be used. A Palestinian official said: “The vaccines are intended for humanitarian cases, and not for senior Palestinian officials.” KAN, which first reported on the matter, speculated that the doses would go to the PA President Mahmoud Abbas, who is 85 years old. PLO Secretary-General and top Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat died of COVID-19 in November, at age 65. The Prime Minister’s Office and Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) would not confirm or deny the report. The PA inquired about obtaining coronavirus vaccines from Israel for the first time earlier this week. The reports of Israel sending vaccines to the PA come after weeks of activists accusing Israel of blocking Palestinians from getting vaccinated, claiming that Israel is required to do so under international law, and some media outlets amplifying that false narrative. Under article 17 of the Oslo Accords, the PA is responsible for healthcare, including vaccines, for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Israel has been vaccinating Palestinians in east Jerusalem. [See also “New Congresswoman Criticizes Israel Over Vaccines for Palestinians” \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Egyptian FM Speaks with Israeli, PA Counterparts for Talks

Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry spoke with his Israeli and PA counterparts as part of an attempt to prepare for a meeting intended to “advance peace in the region,” according to a statement by the Egyptian Foreign Ministry. According to the statement, the three top diplomats — Shoukry, Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi, and Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki — spoke in advance of a meeting before France, Germany, Jordan and Egypt to “discuss new ways to advance the peace process.” PA President Mahmoud Abbas has said in recent weeks that he is seeking to set up an “international peace conference” under the auspices of the UN and the so-called Middle East Quartet — the UN, US, Russia, and the EU— with an eye towards establishing a Palestinian state. So far, however, few public advances have been made to engage Israel on the initiative, and Abbas’s project has largely sunk without a trace. The Israelis and the Palestinians have engaged in bilateral talks several times since the signing of the first agreements between the two parties in the 1990s. Each round of so-called final status negotiations — often under American auspices — to end the conflict have thus far ended in bitter recriminations from both sides. Palestinians often lamented what they deemed biased mediation by Washington, while Israelis charged that Palestinians were not serious about their peace plans, repeatedly rejecting their offers without providing alternatives. [See also “Will Latest Effort to Mend Fatah-Hamas Ties Succeed?” \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Poking the General Public in the Eye

By Oded Shalom

- **What is the average secular Israeli supposed to think when he/she sees the leader of the Litvak Haredim, Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, administering the affairs of the Haredim as if it they lived in a separate autonomy, disconnected from the country? The first thing they wonder is: who is looking out for me? If envoys on behalf of the government go to the rabbi, in fear and trembling, and ask him to close Haredi schools, and he is initially inclined to order them closed but then immediately changes his mind and decides to leave them open even though a general and strict lockdown is about to be imposed, who is the leader of the secular community, whose schools are closed every second day without a second thought? Their schools are simply shut down, without making any pointless calculations about the infection rate about whether they are in green, yellow, orange or red localities. Who is the leader of the majority of the population that is not Haredi, the people whose businesses and workplaces have been closed down and who have been placed on unpaid leave or are dependent on grants from the state, the leader who make decisions for them without considering the state's position?**
- **What kind of shared fate is this when one side of the equation couldn't care less about the other? What kind of mutual responsibility are we talking about if there is not even a semblance of thinking about the general public, the public that is not Haredi, the public that is expected to obey the strict rules and laws of the coronavirus era? A brief visit to Bnei Brak yesterday afternoon made it clear that we are not a country with a single set of laws. A quarter of an hour's drive from Tel Aviv by moped, on Rabbi Shach Street, from there to Rabbi Akiva Street and after that, maneuvering through the traffic to Hazon Ish Street, you can see many hundreds of children with school bags, and it's patently clear to you that tomorrow too, and next week too, if you return to Bnei Brak, you will see the same picture. Schools in most of Israel's cities and towns will be closed, but here in Bnei Brak and in other Haredi towns and neighborhoods, they will remain open. They also remained open in the last lockdown and have continued to operate as usual since then, whereas the state schools made contortions to operate at one- third capacity, and barely even that.**
- **You walk around here in Bnei Brak and you can't help but think about that cliché. Urinating in the pool is rude, but who sees? But doing that from the diving board is to poke the general public in the eye, and then to give that finger a twist. This battle against COVID is almost a year old. There have been many victims, in body and in soul. People have lost everything, thousands of families, have fallen beneath the poverty line. There is not enough room here to give an account of the damage that this pandemic has caused—a pandemic that is still taking dozens of people every day despite the vaccine. But the Haredi public and its leaders act as if they are not part of the general public. They are very good at demanding and getting budgets, but as for making even a semblance of sharing the burden in return, go ask the honorable rabbi. We'll see what he decides.**

Despite the Government, We Will Comply

By Nahum Barnea

- There are some decrees that must be obeyed. I am asking each and every one of the readers to take the instructions of the new and strict iteration of lockdown number 3 seriously. That request isn't made lightly. Every evening we are going to see footage from huge weddings thrown by Haredim who for all intents and purposes have been exempted from complying with the state laws; if we were to visit Haredi cities, including cities in which the infection rate has soared, we would see that schools are open and the synagogues are teeming with activity. We will think about our children, who have been out of school for nearly a year. We will think about them and we will become envious, but we will fully comply with this lockdown. Every day the prime minister and the health minister will tell us that the only thing that is on their minds day and night is the Israeli public's health. We won't believe them.
- Every Israeli with eyes in his head—be they left or right, pro-Bibi or anti-Bibi, a cabinet minister or a civil servant in the Health Ministry—knows that all the decisions that the cabinet has made during the coronavirus crisis have been neck-deep in politics. Ben Gurion Airport was forsaken because Netanyahu didn't want to antagonize Trump; the Haredim were given an exemption because Netanyahu knew that footage of police officers raiding a Haredi event would be damaging to him when he needed the Haredim on the day after the next election. They don't vote for him at the polling stations, but if and when the issue of legislation to grant him immunity is put on the agenda, they will be more loyal to him than even Likud voters.
- There are 200,000 people in Israel who work in education. The Health Ministry has a list of their names. They haven't been vaccinated, but the employees of the Israel Airports Authority have been vaccinated. Why? Because the chairman of the union of Israel Airports Authority workers, Pinhas Idan, is more important to Netanyahu than Teachers Association Chairwoman Yafa Ben David. Between 10,000 and 20,000 people work in special education. They will continue to work with the children in their care even during the lockdown. They could all be vaccinated in the space of a single evening. Nevertheless, they haven't been vaccinated. Why? According to one of the more prevalent explanations within the Likud, Health Minister Edelstein and Health Ministry Director General Professor Hezi Levy are angry with Education Minister Yoav Galant, who has attacked the Health Ministry repeatedly in the media. We all find personal spats within the government to be utterly maddening. Nevertheless, we will comply with the lockdown. Galant revealed to the public a fact that the Health Ministry would have preferred to play down: the schools are not being shut because of the infection rate among the children. The infection rate among schoolchildren has been all but identical in the various age groups—regardless of whether the children studied in full-sized classes or in half-sized classes; regardless of whether the children attended classes every day or came to school only some days of the week. The time spent in school wasn't a factor in the infection rate among schoolchildren.

- **Schools are being shut down to impact the parents. It seems that the government has just one way of forcing parents to comply with the lockdown: by imprisoning them in their homes along with their little ones. The government has turned the children into their parents' babysitters, making them the guardians of the lockdown. From the mouths of children and infants you have ordained praise [Psalms 8]. Netanyahu argues that the only way to deal with the coronavirus crisis is by making swift decisions, without excessive arguments. This crisis can't be managed when there are more than 30 cabinet ministers, each one of whom has an opinion. He is right, we say, absolutely right, and then we remember who insisted on forming a government with more than thirty ministers, who formed the gigantic coronavirus cabinet, who made an ideology out of putting off cabinet decisions. Nevertheless, we will comply with the lockdown.**
- **We will do so for the sake of the schoolchildren who are wasting away at home; we will do so for the sake of their parents and for the sake of the elderly who haven't touched their grandchildren in nearly a year. We will do so for the sake of the retailers, who have lost their livelihoods. We will do so for the sake of the workers whose factories have been shut down. We will do so for the sake of Israel's future fortitude. If we are able to restrain ourselves, this will be the last lockdown. Then, once the pandemic is over, we will all remember everything that the government would like us to forget.**