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Israel and Middle East News Update

Friday, January 8

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January 8, 2021

Ynet News

Netanyahu and Israeli Leaders Condemn DC Riots

Prime Minister [Netanyahu](#) and other Israeli leaders condemned the storming of the US Capitol by supporters of President Trump. During a joint press conference with Secretary of Treasury Mnuchin, Netanyahu - a close ally of the Republican president - labeled the unrest in the US capital that ended in four deaths and 52 arrests as "disgraceful." Netanyahu's rivals condemned his hesitance to comment on the unrest. The premier was also criticized for hesitating to comment when US media projected Biden to become the next president. Donald Trump has contested the results, raising claims of widespread voter fraud and irregularities that tipped the scale in favor of the former Delaware senator. [See also "What Happened at the Capitol Can Happen at the Israeli Knesset" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Times of Israel

Aides: Worried as Biden's FP Team Looking Like Obama's

Netanyahu's closest advisers are reportedly concerned about the foreign policy team that President-elect Biden is putting together as it begins to look more like that of former president Obama, who sparred frequently with [Netanyahu](#) over Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Wendy Sherman, a chief negotiator for the 2015 nuclear deal, will be nominated for the role of deputy secretary of state. Biden has also tapped John Kerry to serve as a special envoy on climate change and Obama's national security adviser Susan Rice to server as director of the White House Domestic Policy Council. Jake Sullivan, who was also involved in negotiating the Iran deal vehemently opposed by the Netanyahu government, will serve as Biden's national security adviser. The growing list of "Obama people" has members of Netanyahu's National Security Council grumbling, [Axios](#) reported. [See also "As Biden Inauguration Nears, Netanyahu Warns US Against Rejoining Iran Nuke Deal" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ynet News

PM: Most Israelis Will Be Able to Get Vaccinated by March

Netanyahu said that most Israelis will be able to get vaccinated by March, with a large shipment of the Pfizer vaccine expected to land in Israel next week. Israeli HMOs announced they have paused delivery of first coronavirus vaccine until the supply is replenished, with additional Pfizer shipments originally expected to arrive only in February. Netanyahu, however, said the delivery will arrive much sooner than planned following the signing of a new agreement, in an effort to continue Israel's high-speed vaccination campaign that so far saw almost 2 million Israelis inoculated. Netanyahu added that the new shipment means the majority of Israelis over the age of 16 will be able to get inoculated within weeks. [See also "Some Israeli Arabs, Jerusalem Palestinians Wary of Coronavirus Vaccine" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Israel Convicts Palestinian Activist of Unauthorized Protest

An Israeli military court convicted Palestinian rights activist Issa Amro for protesting without a permit, obstructing Israeli soldiers' activities in the city of Hebron and assaulting a Jewish settler. Amro denied the conviction of six of 18 charges against him filed in 2016. Arguments over sentencing will await a further hearing on February 8. Amro founded an activist group that regularly protests against settlement construction in Hebron. Under heavy Israeli military protection, around 1,000 settlers live there among 200,000 Palestinians. Amnesty International said the charges against Amro were "politically motivated and linked to his peaceful work in exposing Israel's human rights violations." The group has also condemned as "disgraceful" charges brought against Amro by the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. The PA has accused Amro of "disturbing public order" and "insulting higher authorities" over Facebook posts in 2017 critical of Palestinian leaders. Amro said his next Palestinian court hearing is on January 20. [See also "Prominent Palestinian Activist Found Guilty of Obstructing Security Forces, Assault" \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Alleged Israeli Airstrike Reported in Southern Syria

An alleged Israeli airstrike targeted southern Syria. The strikes were launched from the Golan Heights, a Syrian military source told SANA, claiming that most of the incoming missiles were intercepted by Syrian air defenses. The opposition-affiliated Halab Today TV reported that more than five strikes targeted sites near the First Division of the Syrian military in the Al-Kiswah area, south of Damascus. Weapons depots, observation points and radar sites belonging to the First Division were targeted in the strikes, according to Halab Today, adding that at least eight Syrian soldiers were killed and a number of others were injured. The strikes also targeted radar sites belonging to the Syrian military and pro-regime militias near As-Suwayda, killing a Syrian soldier from the Aleppo area and damaging equipment, according to Halab Today. Official Syrian sources have not confirmed any casualties. [See also "Iran, Hezbollah Lead Mediation to Restore Hamas-Damascus Ties" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Reuters

Qatar Emerges Resolute and Unscathed From Gulf Spat

Qataris awoke to a surprise blockade and boycott by Gulf Arab neighbors 3 1/2 years ago, and this week were jolted again by the sudden announcement that it was all over. The period in between was bitter, with mud-slinging by both sides and vicious media blitzes, social media trolling, expensive lobbying efforts in Washington, and allegations of hacks and leaks. Criticism of the boycott was a criminal offense in Saudi Arabia, the [UAE](#), Bahrain and Egypt as the four sought to punish Qatar. Qatar's resolve in the face of the assault showed how little the campaign achieved as the small, but influential US ally holds firm with its ties to Turkey, Iran and Islamists. Qatari news websites, including Al Jazeera English and Arabic pages, were still blocked in the UAE. Newspapers in the UAE and Saudi Arabia led with front-page photos of Tuesday's Gulf summit and positive headlines of the rift ending. [See also "With Eye on US Ties, Saudi Arabia Leads Pack on Gulf Détente" \(Reuters\)](#)

Netanyahu Trial Postponed by Coronavirus Lockdown

In an extraordinary turnaround, the Jerusalem District Court ordered the postponement of Netanyahu's trial, citing the [coronavirus](#) lockdown and the large number of necessary participants. The order could potentially push the calling of witnesses to right before or right after election day. The order came less than 48 hours after the same court rejected Netanyahu's request for postponing his January 13 hearing next week. The court had said that although the prosecution had amended the indictment, that 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. The court ordered him to immediately produce these documents for the defense, while permitting him to censor irrelevant material in those documents. It was unclear why Acting Justice Minister Benny Gantz kept the courts open if the final result was still postponing Netanyahu's trial. Netanyahu's trial was also postponed by two months from March to May during the first lockdown, but was not postponed during the second one. [See also "A-G Likely to Indict Interior Minister Deri for Tax Fraud, Not Bribery" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Turkey Says Talks with France to Normalize Ties Going Well

Turkey and France are working on a roadmap to normalize ties and talks are going well, Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu said, adding Ankara was ready to improve ties with its NATO ally if Paris showed the same willingness. Turkey has repeatedly traded barbs with France over policies in Syria, Libya, the eastern Mediterranean and Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as over the publication of cartoons of Prophet Mohammad in France. Paris has led a push for EU sanctions on Turkey. Speaking alongside his Portuguese counterpart in Lisbon, Cavusoglu said the current tensions between the NATO allies stemmed from Paris "categorically" opposing Turkey since Turkey's 2019 offensive into northeast Syria against the Syrian Kurdish YPG. Last month, the EU prepared punitive measures over Turkey's dispute with members Greece and Cyprus over rights to offshore resources in the eastern Mediterranean but decided to postpone the measures until March despite an earlier push by France to sanction Ankara. After months of tensions, Turkish President Erdogan and French President Macron discussed their differences in a phone call in September, agreeing to improve ties. But the two presidents later traded accusations over a host of issues as tensions flared again. [See also "Israel Side-Eyes Turkish Offers of Friendship as Ankara Shelters Hamas" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Mob Hatred

By Ben-Dror Yemini

- **The US will overcome the violence, which did not begin this week, but it will most likely not overcome the volcano of hatred. The rioters who took over Capitol Hill, even if for only a few hours, is the tip of the iceberg. The scenes were disgraceful. The security forces lost control. They were forced to spirit away the vice president and senators to emergency tunnels. It looked more like a Hollywood movie than a Washingtonian reality. But it happened, and it's not over. Trumpism is still there, along with the racist and extreme right wing that was waiting for this moment. The lunatic left wing is also in the background. This past year it set fire to the streets with horrific sights of burning stores and looting. This is a warning sign.**
- **Yes, for us in Israel, too. We must talk about hatred, because it is the big problem. Something changed in the US over the past decade. It's hard to put a finger on the turning point. There were violent outbursts in the past, too, but there was a extensive middle class that formed the backbone. There was dialogue. It has faded away. Over the past few years, it has become almost impossible to put Democrats and Republicans in one room. Don't say a word about Trump, the Democrats or the Republicans, I was warned by my hosts over and over before every lecture to a Jewish community in the US. The issue is volatile. In the name of political correctness, American universities have turned into institutions for silencing mouths.**
- **And then came the waves of violence that culminated in the riots following the murder of George Floyd. Among the Democrats and the elites, this violence merited more justification than condemnation. So even with all the lack of respect for Trump and his incitement, he is not alone in the defendant's dock. Jerusalem is not Washington. The house on Balfour Street and the siege on it are not the break-in of to the Capitol. The flames of hatred here are still lower. But the lesson has to be an internal conversation. Former prime minister Ehud Barak talked about a million citizens taking to the streets if Netanyahu wins in order to "block the destruction of democracy with our bodies." Trump could not have said it better. The house on Balfour Street also creates incitement without pause. Others call any rival "scum" and social media fans the flames. What happened there is liable to happen here unless we return to disagreement over substance. That has to happen right now. Tomorrow may be too late.**

Coming Soon

By Sima Kadmon

- **Don't say that it can't happen here. Don't say that it's different here. Enough things have happened here in the last few years that we never believed could have taken place. In our worst nightmares, we did not think that we would turn into what we have become. In general, who would have believed up until two days ago that an incited American mob would make its way to Capitol Hill, one of the purest symbols of the democratic superpower, would break into Congress with the legislators present inside and vandalize and loot under the noses of the security forces? Who would have believed that an event of this magnitude would take place in a place in which the finger, and sometimes the knee, of the police is so trigger happy, certainly when it comes to Black citizens; that in such an historic and unprecedented event—the closest thing to an attempted coup—that the American security forces would display such impotence, such powerlessness?**
- **Ever since losing the elections (and prior to that as well), Trump has been delegitimizing entire publics, from the courts to his Democratic rivals to the American media. His lies, his distortions, his repression, his living in an alternate reality—should have long since set off warning lights in the president's circle. Not only is the man dangerous—neither does he bother to hide it. What is most dangerous is that the US president incites an entire public into believing that his election loss is not his, but that of the Republicans, of his voters, of America. That the election was stolen from them under their noses, that the results were faked. This is not all that different from what Netanyahu has been doing for a long time, when he pushed Israeli society into a polarizing conversation, into an atmosphere of division and into being a country that is under a heavy cloud that threatens its democracy.**
- **That is what the prime minister is doing when he tries to create an imaginary reality in which he is not the one facing trial, but rather the entire Likud. It is not he who is charged with bribery, fraud and breach of trust, but rather half of the people. What was the purpose of that famous picture of him standing in front of the courthouse in Jerusalem, with almost half of the Likud ministers standing behind him, if not to create the illusion that they too were on trial together with him? And what about all of the attacks by Amsalem, Regev, Mark and Zohar, if not to cause the judges to think twice, because they are not only judging Netanyahu—but the government. The party. Half of the people.**
- **Let there be no doubt: if Netanyahu loses the elections, he will cling to the horns of the altar [Hebrew idiom taken from a Biblical injunction that enabled fugitives to cling to the horns of the altar, and subsequently they were granted asylum]. He has, even now, fabricated myths about a stolen election, which his son Yair tweets with enthusiasm. He has, even now, begun to sow the seeds that the election will be stolen. It's not hard to imagine the delegitimization that Netanyahu perform do if he loses—of the president, of the Central Elections Committee, of the courts. He will try to project that the elections were stolen from half of the people. And if there is disagreement about the vote count—God spare us.**

- Yesterday morning, a few hours after the attempted coup on Capitol Hill, journalist Boaz Golan wrote on Twitter: “The Americans are not suckers like the right wing in Israel.” Golan is a right-wing journalist; he is the host of a news and current affairs program on Channel 20. He is considered an extreme Bibi-ist even on his channel. It could be that what he wrote reflects the mindset of the Bibi-ists that will turn into a gushing stream ahead of the elections and into an actual storm once when the results are out. So, don’t say that it can’t happen here. The potential is there. The people who will do the work if necessary are also there, to storm the Knesset, or the Supreme Court. Today’s Netanyahu has no red lines, says a political source. He is prepared to do anything that will save him, whether this refers to his legal affairs or his loss of power. The question, says this source, is whether he has a huge public that will follow him. Judging by the right-wing demonstrations of late, the source said, I’m not certain that he does. It’s enough to see how limp and belated Netanyahu’s response was to the events in Washington to learn where his mind is today, long after other [world] leaders, and even after statements were issued by Foreign Minister Ashkenazi and by New Hope Chairman Gideon Saar. Netanyahu appeared to have waited for Congress to ratify Biden’s victory before he risked a response. That is how a leader who boasts that Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East behaves.
- Bennett is currently facing a strategic juncture. He is Netanyahu’s last hope for getting votes from the other side, after losing seats to Saar. Even now, Bennett has seats that he took from Blue and White that Netanyahu has his eyes on. That is what makes the scuffle between Bennett and Smotrich more significant than it should be. Bennett has no problem disconnecting from Smotrich. That will even help him electorally, as the latest polls show. But Yamina has no infrastructure, whereas Smotrich has institutions and yeshivas. Bennett fears a repeat of what happened to him before, when the polls gave him 11 seats and he ended up under the electoral threshold; he fears that he will lose the four seats that come from the national religious sector. That is the reason that he resurrected the Jewish Home this week, with Nir Orbach--a Bennett--man the candidate to succeed the outgoing Rafi Peretz being, Bennett’s plan is for Orbach to win the leadership of the Jewish Home and to bring its municipal infrastructure to Yamina. This shows that not only is Bennett not in Netanyahu’s pocket (yet) —he is also ensuring that he won’t have to be.