



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and Middle East News Update

Monday, February 22

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News Excerpts

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Jerusalem Post

Netanyahu Needs Yamina, Gantz Falls Below Threshold

A KAN [poll](#) shows how if elections were held today, the Likud party, led by Prime Minister Benjamin [Netanyahu](#), will have recovered slightly, winning 30 seats, while the party of the Alternate Prime Minister, Defense Minister and [Blue & White](#) head Benny Gantz, will have sunk below the electoral threshold. The poll found that second largest party would be Yesh Atid, with 18. Gideon Saar's New Hope also retained its lead as the third largest party with 14, followed by Yamina, which has slightly strengthened. Netanyahu's supporters would make up 50 seats. If the leading bloc ends up being the anti-Netanyahu one, they would actually come out on top, with 58. Yamina, with 12 seats, would be the eventual kingmaker. The party has not yet committed to sitting under a Netanyahu-led government again. [Dig Deeper "Likud Held Talks with Palestinians Over Netanyahu Support in Elections"](#) (Ynet News)

Times of Israel

Egyptian Minister Visits Israel to Talk Energy Cooperation

Netanyahu hosted Egypt's energy minister, during the first public visit to Israel by a senior Egyptian government official in five years. Netanyahu told Minister for Petroleum and Mineral Resources Tarek el-Molla that the discovery of natural gas in the Mediterranean Sea was an "amazing opportunity" for [cooperation](#) between Israel, Egypt, and other countries on energy and other matters. Netanyahu called the visit an "important day" for the countries' relationship and said there was enough gas for both to supply their own citizens and become major exporters. El-Molla said that he was looking forward to talks at the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), which comprises Israel, Egypt, Cyprus, Greece, and the Palestinian Authority (PA). Israel is dealing with a [major oil spill](#), which has highlighted activists' fears of environmental damage due to energy exploitation in the eastern Mediterranean. [Dig Deeper "Rare Visit to Israel by Egypt's Oil Minister Sends Signals to Biden, Erdogan"](#) (Times of Israel)

Ynet News

In Letter to Biden, PA, Hamas Commit to Two-State Solution

The PA sent an official letter to the White House claiming that all factions were committed to the establishment of a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. The letter was delivered by the PA's Head of the General Authority of Civil Affairs, to President Joe Biden's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Israeli and Palestinian Affairs Hady Amr. The letter stated that all the factions, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, were committed to international law standards, that the PLO is the political umbrella and the legitimate sole representative for the Palestinian people and that the results of the elections will be respected and that a peaceful transfer of power will take place afterward if it may occur. The memo also asserted the factions' continued commitment to "popular peaceful resistance" until a Palestinian state is founded.

Qatar Eases Salary Crisis for Gaza's Civil Servants

Qatar's Ambassador to the Palestinian territories revealed in a press statement that Qatar has agreed to increase its contribution to the salaries of the Hamas-appointed government employees in the Gaza Strip from \$7m to \$10m a month. The contribution is part of the \$360m grant to the Gaza Strip announced by Qatar. The Hamas movement has been suffering an acute financial crisis under the Israeli siege. This has prevented the movement from paying its 50,000 employees full salaries. Instead, the employees only obtain an advance payment of 40% to 50% of their monthly salaries. The employees' salaries issue has been on top of the agenda of the inter-Palestinian talks between Fatah and Hamas, and the multiple negotiations rounds held in the wake of every military escalation between Israel and Hamas. Qatar has helped defuse the Hamas-Israeli escalation through political efforts and financial aid. [Dig Deeper "Abbas Orders Palestinian Public Freedoms Boosted Before Planned Elections" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

I24 News

Iran Hosts IAEA Chief Ahead of Sanctions Deadline

UN nuclear watchdog head Rafael Grossi arrived in Iran for talks on the eve of Tehran's deadline for US sanctions to be lifted, as President Biden called for "careful diplomacy." Grossi was received in Tehran by Iran's ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and Iran Atomic Energy Organization. Iran has notified the IAEA that it will suspend "voluntary transparency measures," notably inspection visits to non-nuclear sites, including military sites suspected of nuclear-related activity if the US has not lifted the sweeping sanctions that former President Trump reimposed in 2018. Tehran also said it will not cease working with the IAEA or expel its inspectors. The new measures, laid out in a law passed by the conservative-dominated parliament in December, are to go into effect on Tuesday, the head of Iran's atomic body confirmed. [Dig Deeper "Road to Renewed Iran Nuclear Deal Likely to Be Long and Bumpy" \(Reuters\)](#)

Reuters

US Communicating with Iran Over Detained Americans

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said the US had begun to communicate with Iran over the country's detention of American citizens, calling the matter a "complete and utter outrage". Iran has arrested dozens of dual nationals, including several Americans, in recent years, mostly on espionage charges. Rights activists accuse the country of trying to use the detentions to win concessions from other countries, though Tehran dismisses the charge. Following Sullivan's remarks, an Iranian news website affiliated with Iran's Supreme National Security Council cited a source as saying that any communication between Tehran and Washington about detained US citizens had been conducted via the Swiss embassy, which handles US interests, rather than through any direct contact. Sullivan added that Biden was determined to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon and that diplomacy was the best way to do that. [Dig Deeper "Why Is Israel Engaging in New Construction at the Dimona Nuclear Site?" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Saudi Arabia to Invest \$20b in Its Military Industry

Saudi Arabia will invest more than \$20 billion in its domestic military industry over the next decade as part of aggressive plans to boost local military spending, the head of the kingdom's military industry regulator said. Saudi Arabia wants to develop and manufacture more weapons and military systems domestically, aiming to spend 50% of the military budget locally by 2030. "The government has put a plan that we will be investing in excess of \$10b in the military industry in Saudi Arabia over the next decade and equal amounts on research and development," Governor of the General Authority for Military Industries (GAMI) told a defense conference in Abu Dhabi. He also said the kingdom plans to increase military research and development (R&D) spending from 0.2% to around 4% of armaments expenditure by 2030. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, some 73% of the Saudi arms imports in between 2015 and 2019, during its ongoing campaign against Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, came from the US. The UK accounted for another 13% of Saudi arms imports, the institute said. While Saudi Arabia has been eager to shop for military hardware and munitions in the US, the Biden administration suspended several arms sales to the Middle East, including a deal with Riyadh, for review. [Dig Deeper "Drone Attacks on Saudi Arabia From Iraq Are a New Threat" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Erdogan: Common Interests with US Outweigh Differences

The common interests of Turkey and the US outweigh their differences and Ankara wants improved cooperation with Washington, President Tayyip Erdogan said striking a rare conciliatory tone. Ties between the two NATO allies have been strained over a host of issues. In December, the US sanctioned Turkey for its purchase of Russian S-400 defense systems, while Ankara has been infuriated by US support for the Kurdish YPG militia in Syria, which it considers a terrorist organization. Turkey, which has said it wants improved ties under President Biden, has called on Washington to end its support for the YPG and accused it of siding with militants who it says executed 13 Turks in northern Iraq this month, while the US has criticized Ankara over rights and freedoms. Turkey has hired Washington-based law firm Arnold & Porter to lobby for its readmission into the F-35 jet program, where it was a buyer and manufacturer, after it was removed by the United States over the S-400s. Washington's claim that the defense systems poses a threat to the F-35s is rejected by Ankara.

The Road to Anarchy

By Ben-Dror Yemini

- It could be that the mayors of the “forum of 15” are right. After all, if most of the economy has reopened, there is no point in keeping seventh- to tenth-graders learning on Zoom. After all, if they aren’t meeting in school, they’re meeting in the streets, and now they’re also meeting in the malls. It could be that more decisions should be in the hands of the local authorities, which sometimes know better how to handle matters. It could also be that Ron Huldai was right when he announced that he was reopening cultural events, which began yesterday evening. It could also be that the rabbis are right, who think that the yeshivas must remain open.
- But that is precisely the problem. With so many people deciding for themselves, we are losing governability. How is the mayor of Givatayim any different from Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky or from some Haredi faction that decides for itself? How can we complain about one and justify the other? The question is not who is right. Presumably, with hindsight, and sometimes with foresight, there are good reasons to oppose the decisions of the Health Ministry or the government. But good reasons are not a reason for taking the law into one’s own hands. We are now in a battle against the coronavirus, which is showing signs of success after several failures, thanks to the vaccines obtained by the prime minister. But this is only one issue. There are another thousand and one issues, in innumerable fields. What will be next? Will the mayors decide on construction plans that don’t conform to the national master plan? Perhaps some mayors will decide to have a school curriculum sponsored by the Lehava organization in order to broaden political debate, while other school principals will decide to adopt a B’Tselem curriculum?
- The minute we begin to disregard the central government—we know how it begins, but not how it will end. We also know that the division of authorities in a democratic system of government is not always viewed by some in the population as the smartest, but that does not justify a rebellion by the mayors. They can fight to change the decisions. The mayors have enough ways to stir up public opinion and to demand change. They must not resort to non-compliance. The battle against the coronavirus is a national battle. Up until now, those local authorities that upheld the rules were less hurt.
- The local authorities where a high percentage of the population is vaccinated are defeating the virus. But no town is a closed ghetto. When there is mass infection in Bnei Brak or in Herzliya, this moves to other cities. The decisions of the “forum of 15” affect all of Israel. We can have empathy for their demand to reopen schools. And if, God forbid, they reopen in violation of the government’s rules, this will constitute an independent policy, this will be anarchy. We have enough places in Israel where the central government has lost its grip. We have to fight to have greater governability, not to have more chaos.

Indecision

By Yossi Ahimeir

- Naftali Bennett is proving the rule of Israeli politics more and more: the smaller I am, the stronger I am. The fewer the seats I have, the greater my demands, up to and including being prime minister in an alternating premiership, and even going first. Especially when I am the deciding factor. Bennett could learn from someone in the current government with an alternating premiership agreement—Benny Gantz. He is evaporating in the polls, and the closer we get to Election Day and the closer his political chances come to an end, the greater his temerity. Israel has almost never had anything like this: he had 33 seats in the previous election, just a year ago, and now the assessment is that he will plummet below the electoral threshold in a month from now. That hasn't stopped the Blue and White chairman from acting as an aggressive opposition within the cabinet. A party that joined the coalition to fight the coronavirus together is now just sticking spokes in the wheel.
- The whole alternating premiership thing was born in 1984, out of a sincere wish for internal unity. It made the Peres-Shamir government possible, a national unity government that functioned fairly well for four years, and two more years without an alternating premiership. It was also an expression of the absolute equality between both blocs, left and right. After Blue and White fell apart, there was no moral reason for Gantz to demand an alternating premiership and an equal share of the bloated number of portfolios, nor is there any moral reason for Bennett to place that condition now on his willingness to grant Netanyahu the 61 st vote [recommending that the president task him to form the government]. But integrity is different from ambition. Particularly when Netanyahu does not have a definite government without little Yamina.
- The loaded name “Yamina” [literally “right-wing”] is more binding than any other vague name like “Yesh Atid” [literally “there is a future”] or “New Hope.” It's an unmistakably ideological declaration. Will Bennett's personal ambition outweigh his party's substance, which its very name expresses? Will his right hand forget its cunning [paraphrasing Psalms 137:5]? With all his lofty ideological talk, he's creating the sense among his kippa-wearing potential voters that his top priorities are not the Land of Israel, nor the settlements, and not even Jewish tradition. Only the lust for power, the demand for the alternating premiership, to be the next prime minister, come what may.
- How pleasant it must be for Bennett to read the juicy headline: “Bennett holds the keys.” A shot of confidence that boosts the ego. After all, according to the commentators and the polls, he can decide, with his eight to twelve seats, between a government led by Netanyahu or by Lapid and the left. Meanwhile, he's been viciously attacking the incumbent government—which he's allowed to do, he's a member of the opposition—and claiming credit for the battle against the coronavirus, success in counterterrorism, and reforms in the justice system. He was defense minister for six months—so what has he done with that since? His deputy was the justice minister, and how did she change the justice system? The coronavirus? All he did was wave a little booklet.

- **A little humility wouldn't hurt Bennett. He's ignoring the fact that all of Israel is moving to the right [in Hebrew, yamina], albeit not to Yamina, of course. So why are parts of the right wing, including Yamina, confusing the public, shooting the Likud-led camp in the foot? Bennett needs to understand: this election, which people say is revolving only around one question—yes Bibi, no Bibi—is still a decision between right and left. With a senior post (not necessarily an alternating premiership) in the next Netanyahu-led government, Bennett can guard the right wing's positions, if he snaps out of this. In contrast, the group of Lapid, Michaeli, Saar and Lieberman will form a government in which the left sets the tone. Does Bennett envisage himself as a member of such a cabinet? Will his indecision, which leads to media coverage, not drive away his natural voters and leave him with six or fewer seats again?**