Israel and Middle East News Update

Monday, December 6

Headlines:

- Flag Marches Held in Support of Jews in Mixed Israeli Cities
- After Half a Year of PM Bennett, Voters Prefer Netanyahu
- Border Cops Who Shot Palestinian Attacker to Be Cleared
- Israel Return Ex-prisoner Weeks After Ending Hunger Strike
- Kuwait Bans Entry of Ships Holding Goods to Israel
- US Climate Envoy Visits Jordan for Talks on Collaboration
- As Iran Nuclear Talks Hit Snags, Israel Seeks Harder US Line
- UAE’s Top Security Official to Visit Iran

Commentary:

- Yedioth Ahronoth: “Iran: The Arrogance, the Fiasco and What to Do”
  - By Ofer Shelah

- Yedioth Ahronoth: “What Can We Do About Iran?”
  - By Ehud Barak, former Israeli Prime Minister (1999-2001)
I24 News

Flag Marches Held in Support of Jews in Mixed Israeli Cities

Two nationalist rallies known as flag marches took place in the mixed Jewish-Arab cities of Lod and Ramle in central Israel. The demonstrations were intended as a show of support for the Jewish populations in the two cities that experienced riots last May by Arab residents and counter-protests by Jewish residents during the Israeli military operation against Hamas in Gaza. The best-known flag march is the annual event in Jerusalem meant as a show of support for Israeli sovereignty over the entire city. No incidents were reported at the march under the watchful eye of the police. The march didn't go through any mixed Jewish-Arab neighborhoods but instead took place in the main streets of the city. The mayor of Lod from the opposition Likud party, Yair Revivo, was against holding the march for fear of exacerbating tensions, but that did not deter organizers and the march went off without incident. Dig Deeper “Israel Must Save the Arab Sector From Itself” (Ynet News)

Arutz Sheva

After Half a Year of PM Bennett, Voters Prefer Netanyahu

Six months after the formation of the new Bennett-Lapid government, a new poll published by Channel 12 shows a plurality of Israelis prefer former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the helm. The poll found that 43% of Israelis would rather have a government headed by Netanyahu than the current ‘change’ coalition, compared to 36% who favor the current government led by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid. Nearly 45% of respondents preferred Netanyahu as premier over Bennett, with just 25% favoring Bennett. Prime Minister Bennett’s job approval rating stands at 44%, compared to 47% disapproval. Defense Minister Benny Gantz had a net positive job approval rating, with 55% total approval and 33% disapproval. Dig Deeper “New Poll Shows Bennett-Lapid Government Unpopular, but No Other Viable Options” (Times of Israel)

Times of Israel

Border Cops Who Shot Palestinian Attacker to Be Cleared

Two Border Police officers, who on Saturday shot dead a Palestinian assailant after he stabbed a Jewish civilian in a suspected terror attack near the Old City of Jerusalem, are expected to be cleared of any wrongdoing in the case, Hebrew media reported. The probe led by the Justice Ministry’s internal investigations unit was expected to be closed without charges in the coming days. The officers were questioned after video of the incident showed them firing several shots at the attacker once he was already lying on the ground. Police video of the entire incident that was later released showed that the officers did not immediately fire at the assailant but did so only after he repeatedly lunged at them. Israeli forces arrested the brother of the assailant. The brother, who is suspected of having prior knowledge of the assailant’s intentions to carry out an assault and of possibly assisting him, was detained at his home in the West Bank town of Salfit. Dig Deeper “Israeli Wounded in Suspected West Bank Car-Ramming, Driver Shot and Killed” (Times of Israel)
Ynet News

Israel Return Ex-prisoner Weeks After Ending Hunger Strike

Israeli authorities freed a prominent Palestinian prisoner after striking a release deal that ended his marathon 131-day hunger strike. Kayed Fasfous, 32, had remained in an Israeli hospital since ending his strike on Nov. 23. He was the symbolic figurehead of six hunger strikers protesting Israel's controversial policy of “administrative detention,” which allows suspects to be held indefinitely without charge. Israeli authorities arrested him over suspected ties to the Islamist Hamas terror group. Israel says the policy is necessary to keep dangerous suspects locked away without disclosing sensitive information that could expose valuable sources. Palestinians and rights groups say the practice denies the right of due process, allowing Israel to hold prisoners for months or even years without seeing the evidence against them. The law is rarely applied to Israelis. The plight of the six hunger strikers ignited solidarity demonstrations across the West Bank and Gaza mounting pressure on Israel to release the detainees. Dig Deeper “Israel to Probe Wardens Who Allegedly Beat Palestinian Prisoners” (I24 News)

Israel Hayom

Kuwait Bans Entry of Ships Holding Goods to Israel

A Kuwaiti minister issued a decision on banning the entry of commercial ships loaded with goods to and from Israel into Kuwaiti territorial waters, according to local media reports. The ban includes all ships coming from other ports to unload part of their cargo in Kuwaiti ports whenever they are carrying any of the goods stipulated in the ban, with the intention of shipping them to and from... Israel," said Kuwaiti paper Al-Anba. The directive came from Minister of Works and of State for Communications and Information Technology Dr. Rana al-Fares. Kuwait passed a law in May prohibiting any form of contact with Israel and banned Kuwaiti nationals and expats from visiting the Jewish state. The bill also outlawed "expressions of sympathy" with Israel. After former President Donald Trump said he believed Kuwait would be the next to normalize ties with Israel following the signing of the Abraham Accords, Kuwait said it would be the "last to normalize" ties.

I24 News

US Climate Envoy Visits Jordan for Talks on Collaboration

United States Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry is traveling to Jordan for talks with officials on taking action to combat climate change, according to the State Department. “This engagement with government counterparts aims to accelerate global climate action following the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in November 2021,” according to a press release. Although the international COP26 talks to address the challenges posed by climate change, the results of the summit left many activists disappointed. Kerry’s meeting is also expected to focus on areas of regional environmental cooperation in the Middle East. Kerry recently helped to broker a historic environmental deal between Israel and Jordan, with assistance from the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Scientists say that water scarcity is expected to pose a significant challenge to countries in the Middle East in the future amid global climate shifts.
As Iran Nuclear Talks Hit Snags, Israel Seeks Harder US Line

The long-delayed resumption of nuclear talks with Iran has gotten off to a rough start — with Iran digging in and its negotiating partners openly voicing frustration and pessimism. After five days of talks in Vienna ended last week, the United States said Iran did not appear to be serious. European diplomats accused Iran of backtracking on previous promises. Even Russia, which has stronger relations with Iran, questioned Iran’s commitment to the process. Israel, an outside observer with a stake in the outcome of the talks, has ramped up its rhetoric and is dispatching two top security officials to Washington for consultations. Israel says that the negotiations must be accompanied by a “credible” military threat to ensure that Iran does not delay indefinitely. Perhaps the most encouraging outcome of last week’s talks was an agreement to continue talking. When negotiators reconvene in coming days, it could become clearer if the wide gaps visible last week were a sign of posturing or a serious crisis. Dig Deeper “Gantz, Mossad Chief to Pressure US to Attack Iran” (Jerusalem Post)

UAE’s Top Security Official to Visit Iran

The UAE’s top national security adviser Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed Al Nahyan will visit Iran to discuss expanding bilateral ties with the Islamic Republic, Iranian state media reported. There was no immediate comment from the UAE foreign ministry about the visit of Sheikh Tahnoon, who is a brother of the country's de facto ruler Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed and chairman of state investor ADQ. In 2019, the UAE started engaging with Iran following attacks on tankers off Gulf waters and on Saudi energy infrastructure. Sunni Muslim power Saudi Arabia began direct talks with Iran in April, with Riyadh describing the talks as "cordial" but largely exploratory. Anwar Gargash, diplomatic adviser to the UAE president, said last month that his country was "taking steps to de-escalate tensions with Iran as part of a policy choice towards diplomacy and away from confrontation". A senior US official said Iran came "with proposals that walked back anything - any of the compromises Tehran had floated in the previous six rounds of talks that started in April and were put on hold after the election of hardline president Ebrahim Raisi in June. Dig Deeper “Israel Eyes UAE-Iran Rapprochement with Caution” (Jerusalem Post)
The Arrogance, the Fiasco and What to Do

By Ofer Shelah

- One of the ills of everything relating to the Iranian issue, one that has been evident for a long time, is the difficulty in distinguishing between statements of substance and domestic politics. The central person responsible for this, of course, is Binyamin Netanyahu, the champion of the Iranian fiasco, who constantly mixed the campaign against the Iranian nuclear program with his campaign of slandering all of his political rivals and his unprecedented and incredibly harmful meddling in American politics. But his rivals’ hands aren’t clean either. Ehud Barak, who attacked Netanyahu for the extensive damage that he caused on the Iranian issue, was Netanyahu’s defense minister when Netanyahu went to Congress in 2012 and placed Israel on a particularly sensitive fault line of American politics. Barak also pushed with all his might to put the issue of an Israeli strike on Iran on the agenda (if he really intended to act on that or not is something only he knows), with a campaign whose clearest outcome was that the Obama administration moved farther away from Israel, to the point that when it held the negotiations that resulted in the 2015 JCPOA, Israel had no influence.

- In the last few months, people speaking in the name of the current government have returned to reciting the mantra “Netanyahu left us rubble in all that pertains to Israel’s military capabilities against Iran.” I won’t get into the question of how accurate that statement is. But for anyone who may have forgotten, it is the defense minister who is responsible for cultivating Israel’s military capabilities. The defense ministers from 2016 and to this day, in addition to Netanyahu himself, were Avigdor Liberman, Naftali Bennett and Benny Gantz—all of whom are currently members of the government. Nobody prevented them from taking action on that issue—had they only wanted to do so. This government keeps inundating us with meaningless statements and “decisions” that are mainly meant to deceive. I have no doubt that the Mossad director would never have imagined making the odd “pledge” that Iran would never have nuclear weapons if not for an explicit request by the prime minister.

- The reports about $1.6 billion being allocated for preparing the military option against Iran are also meant to deceive and are old, recycled decisions, some of which have no bearing on the Iranian issue (such as purchasing helicopters and interceptors for the Iron Dome) and almost all of them were made long ago, in the framework of long-term IDF acquisitions—and not as part of an official shopping list to produce the pertinent military capabilities. The security establishment has also done its share by giving briefings about a “new view” of the battle against Iran, which will ostensibly change the course the US administration is on. There is one thing from Barak’s article that I absolutely agree with: an Iranian nuclear bomb will not spell the end of the Zionist enterprise, but it will change the face of the region, is liable to precipitate a nuclear arms race and to grant our enemies in the closest circle a sense of invulnerability, and place devastating nuclear capability in the hands of a fanatical regime. Israel must do everything within its power to prevent that from happening.
But framing this as a question of how many fuel planes and bunker-buster bombs we have is also part of a narrow-vision discourse, which only serves the people who either wish to maintain the illusion that every problem has a military solution or to persuade the public that they are actually doing something. It was the US that put a halt to Iran’s nuclear program when it invaded Iraq in 2003. In the following years, Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert enacted a policy that combined covert assassinations with diplomatic efforts and succeeded in delaying uranium enrichment in Iran. It was Netanyahu who began to talk about Iran in terms of a decisive defeat, as Bogie Yaalon said: the Iranian regime must be brought to the point in which it has to choose between a nuclear bomb and its survival. Iran is a huge country, one that has a clear worldview and historic self-perception as an ancient regional power, with borders that span from Pakistan (a Sunni country with nuclear capability) to Turkey (a regional power with a Sunni Islamist government).

Its regime, despite being vicious and oppressive, has deep popular roots. It is motivated by the belief that the world is hostile toward the single Shiite government in the world and wants to topple it; it is also motivated by its sense of responsibility for the entire Shiite world, and by the memory of the war against Iraq. Its view is much broader than [being exclusively about] Israel, although we mustn’t err and we have to recognize that it considers us a foreign and hated implant. When facing a country of that kind and a regime of that kind, we need to strike a balance, and not talk in terms of defeat. Aggressive Israeli operations—the war-between-wars against Iranian entrenchment in Syria, for example (in contrast to the war against Hizbullah’s arming with precision-guided missiles)—have not helped in any way. Like on other fronts, while we boasted about our ability to drop bombs, the enemy became more entrenched politically and Israel was pushed further away from the room where the decisions were made. Today we hold a position of irrelevance in regard to what is happening in the negotiations. The US administration has not concealed the fact that it views Israel as a nuisance, and our ability to impact the diplomatic effort is zero.

What should we do? We should stop the boasting and making threats that nobody takes seriously. We should consolidate a broad regional front with the countries that are just as concerned as we are about the possibility of a nuclear Iran, but which today are gravitating closer to Iran in the absence of an alternative vision; we must continue our covet campaign and, at the same time, help the world think about broadening the conversation and creating challenges and opportunities for Iran on other fronts, taking into account its other broad range of interests; and we need to work quietly on our military options, which are solely a last resort. We need to recognize that the goal is not to push the Iranians to the point that they have to make a decision; rather, the goal is to help them not reach that point. True, that may not generate headlines, but that is what must be done to avert the danger.
What Can We Do About Iran?
By Ehud Barak

- So, where do we stand regarding Iran? Bennett was right when he complained about the “unfathomable gap between rhetoric and (the paucity of) action,” that he found on the Iranian issue when he became prime minister. [Israel’s] policies on Iran have been bankrupt since 2015; there is only one person who is responsible for that. The failure was rooted in negligent recklessness and dangerous self-delusion. The 2015 agreement truly was terrible, but once it was signed it became an established fact. Netanyahu chose to pointlessly clash with Obama; by so doing he missed a golden opportunity to make Israel more powerful militarily by equipping it with the means [weapons] that would allow it to operate independently against the Iranian nuclear program.

- In 2018 Netanyahu urged Trump to withdraw from the JCPOA, a delusional decision that allowed the Iranians to move forward quickly in the direction of becoming a nuclear threshold state, on the argument that the Americans were the ones who had violated the agreement. Even worse, in both cases, as a result of wallowing in self-delusion, for years Netanyahu failed to act to draft an Israeli and American Plan B in the form of a surgical military operation that might set the Iranians back by years and which could be carried out if the Iranians were to decide to advance towards becoming a nuclear threshold state. Iran is a bitter adversary that is acting to achieve its objectives, but this failure is Netanyahu’s responsibility.

- In a characteristic twist in the plot during this age of psychological engineering, the day will soon arrive when Netanyahu and his mouthpieces will lament the fact “as long as we were led by Netanyahu and Trump, the ‘strong’ leaders, the Iranians were deterred from moving forward. [They will say that] the moment that Biden and Bennett, the ‘weak’ leaders, took the helm—the Iranians began their breakout to nuclear capability.” Of course, that is utter nonsense, one that inverts cause and effect, but we’re likely to hear even worse than that. The severity of Netanyahu’s failure becomes clearer once one understands that preparing a military option that might meaningfully delay the Iranian nuclear program is something that requires several years and massive aid from the United States. The result of that failure is that long before that military option is ready, in just a few months, the Iranians will be able to become a nuclear threshold state, which will make it impossible to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons at a timing of its choosing.

- That is a new reality that necessitates a sober assessment of the situation, decisions and actions rather than hollow threats that might make a good impression on some Israeli citizens but not on the Iranians and their partners to negotiations. The negotiations might be renewed only to idle in neutral, allowing the Iranians to inch forward towards becoming a nuclear threshold state, and they might not be renewed at all. I have repeatedly used the term “nuclear threshold state” because my assessment is that the Iranians have no interest in moving beyond that threshold, which will allow them to chalk up achievements without forcing them to admit to violating the Nuclear Non-Proliferation
Treaty, to which they are signatories—since that would force the other parties to the treaty to act against them once again by imposing sanctions. Even if the Iranians do become a nuclear threshold state, once they have amassed enough fissile material for between one and three nuclear weapons, they will still need another two years or so to produce metallic uranium and to build the weapons. That “threshold” was defined as such because moving forward to enriching to 90% grade and working on a weapons program can be easily concealed.

- The moment that threshold is crossed, UN inspectors will have no way of verifying that Iran is not secretly moving forward to become a real nuclear power. Past experience with Pakistan and mainly with North Korea teaches us that once the curtain is lifted after deliberate concealment, the state in question is much further ahead than the earlier assessments had posited. Iran does not aspire to acquire nuclear weapons in order to drop a bomb on the United States, Israel or any other neighbor. Just as North Korea does not possess nuclear weapons in order to drop a bomb on South Korea, Japan or the United States but, rather, to guarantee the survival of Kim Jong-un’s regime and its freedom of action.

- The ayatollahs are zealots and extremists, but they aren’t idiots. Far from it. They, like North Korea, want to survive and to influence the region, and they do not want to be sent back to the Stone Age. Iran, if it becomes a nuclear threshold state, will enjoy improved standing in the region and the world; it will enjoy immunity from external military intervention to topple the regime; and it will enjoy increased freedom of action in its subversive and other efforts across the entire region. It will be viewed as having achieved a strategic balance with Israel and it will enjoy the public perception of having challenged the world and forcing it to bow to its will. The Iranians think and speak about Israel as an unnatural phenomenon in the Middle East that is destined to disappear under the overbearing pressure of opposition to its essence, goals and very existence—by surrounding it with an active, hostile ring that will wear it down, coupled with violent external resistance and internal weakening.

- No one should underestimate the Iranians’ capabilities or the sincerity of their intentions to see Israel weakened and defeated and to ultimately be wiped off the map. But Israel is not weak. In every visible sphere we are stronger than Iran and any combination of enemies; we have opportunities to cooperate with some of our Sunni neighbors; and the more intelligently we act, the more sweeping support we will enjoy from what is still the strongest country in the world. Furthermore, for more than 50 years Israel has been considered by the world to be a nuclear power and, according to foreign reports, it has spent 50 years making huge investments for the possibility that despite its efforts, a country in the region that is hostile to it will acquire nuclear weapons. The United States is turning its geopolitical strength to dealing with China, and it is withdrawing from its commitment to maintain a presence or for physical military involvement in our region. That is a trend that began during Obama’s term in office, gained momentum under Trump and has now ripened to real action under Biden. There is no chance of persuading the United States either to change those priorities or to attack the Iranian nuclear program in the near future with the goal of setting it back by several years.
Nor is it clear that either the United States or Israel currently have an actionable plan to achieve that objective. That, in a nutshell, is the essence of Netanyahu’s historic failure that was described above. But Israel must make the most of the current situation. Israel’s most urgent need is to have close coordination with the United States to define shared objectives and ways of achieving them if and when Iran does become a nuclear threshold state—and not publicly disagreeing and trading recriminations with the administration, which would serve no purpose and would be perceived by the world as being hollow gestures that reflect discomfiture rather than sober policy that is backed up by the ability to act.

That includes improving the intelligence cooperation, formulating agreements about situations and incidents that will mandate an Israeli and/or American response, and the preparation of concrete plans of action that are ready for execution if and when those situations do arise. Israel needs to coordinate increased aid to Israel in the form of means [weapons] that will allow it to operate independently against Iran if need be, and accelerated development of Israel’s multi-layered missile and rocket defense system. That includes solving the problem of the Iron Dome interceptor missiles, accelerating the development of defensive and offensive laser-based interception capabilities and deploying the next generation of David’s Sling and Arrow missile defense batteries. Under conditions of mutual trust, the United States will want coordination of that kind precisely because its attention will be focused on China.

A nuclear Iran, or even Iran as a nuclear threshold state, is a cardinal change for the worse in Israel’s strategic situation, but it does not pose an existential threat for the foreseeable future. No anticipated development can absolve us of our responsibility to continue to try to find every way to prevent the Iranians from achieving those objectives, but we must never lose our ability to make a sober judgment of our situation. We must also recognize that in the history of nations there is a price that gets paid for failures, and that one of the worst kinds of failures is becoming addicted to illusions and leaders who are out-of-touch with reality. At the current stage, the biggest risk posed by the Iranians’ possible achievement of nuclear threshold state status is not that Israel will face the danger of an Iranian nuclear bomb being dropped on it.

The real risk is the irreversible collapse of the effort to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons. If Iran goes nuclear, then Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are also likely to strive to go nuclear within a decade, and every Third World dictator who so desires will be able to acquire nuclear capability. Under those circumstances (as described years ago by Professor Graham Allison of Harvard University), in another 20 or 30 years an extremist terrorist organization might come to possess a nuclear device, even if only a primitive one—and that would pose a threat to the entire world, and not only to Israel. Israel needs to begin to prepare immediately for that possible scenario as well, mainly in the context of the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East. Empty rhetoric is not the correct course to take. It is no substitute for policy; rather, it is a sure recipe for producing an Israel that is weaker that has less deterrence and freedom of action. We expect more from the government of change.