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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

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Times of Israel

Levi Recites Mourner's Kaddish in German Parliament

Knesset Speaker MK Mickey Levy stood before the German parliament to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day and urged those gathered to protect democracy and educate future generations against hatred. It was the first time that a speaker of the Knesset addressed the full German parliament. During his address, Levy recited part of the Kaddish, a traditional Jewish mourner's prayer, that he read out from a prayer book used by a teenager at his bar mitzvah on October 22, 1938, shortly before the Kristallnacht pogrom instigated by the Nazis against Germany's Jews. Levy's visit was to include meetings with Scholz, Steinmeier and Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock. He visited the historic House of Wannsee, the Berlin villa where the Nazis planned the Final Solution. [Dig Deeper "UN Head Skirts Adoption of IHRA Antisemitism Definition in Holocaust Memorial Speech"](#) (Times of Israel)

Associated Press

As World Marks Holocaust, Some Survivors Still Struggle

Several dozen octogenarians, bundled against the cold, chattered in Russian and Hebrew as they picked through heaps of carrots, onions and grapefruit in a Jerusalem courtyard. Nearly all of them Holocaust survivors, they were picking up donations of food and winter blankets before a snowstorm hit the city on the eve of International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Israel was established in 1948 as a refuge for Jews in the wake of the Holocaust, and it makes great efforts to remember the 6 million Jewish victims of the Nazi genocide and to honor those who survived as heroes. Yet among Israel's estimated 165,000 survivors, roughly 1 in 3 live in poverty, according to a survivors' advocacy group. Many still depend on food donations organized by Israeli charities. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said that the government would budget nearly \$10 million in additional funds to Yad Vashem to help "preserve the memory of the Holocaust in Israel and the world." [Dig Deeper "What Happened to Israel's Holocaust Restitution Program?"](#) (Jerusalem Post)

Ha'aretz

Prime Minister Bennett: 'Netanyahu Threatened Me'

In early May of last year, about five weeks after Israel's election, [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) and Naftali Bennett held a series of meetings in an attempt to establish a right-wing coalition. The chances appeared slim. Netanyahu demanded that Yamina leader Bennett back an alternative plan: another election cycle. "When he realized that I didn't intend to let him drag Israel into a fifth election, he really threatened me," Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said in an [interview](#) with Ha'aretz, recalling the event that had a decisive impact on his move to the anti-Netanyahu camp. "'Listen,' he said to me, 'if I understand correctly what you're going to do, you should know that I am going to employ my entire machine, the army against you.' He demonstrated with his arm," said Bennett, imitating with his limb an airplane descending for an attack. "'I will send the drones at you, and we'll see.'"

Times of Israel

Program Launched to Integrate Arab Workers Into Hi-Tech

Israel has officially launched a \$70 million program to promote entrepreneurship among Arab communities and better integrate members into the country's booming tech industry, where they are severely underrepresented. Israel's Arab community makes up around 20% of the country's population but accounts for just around 3.5% of workers in the tech sector, according to Tsofen, an organization that promotes tech activity in Arab cities and the integration of Arab-Israeli citizens into tech firms. The program, led by the ministries of Innovation, Science and Technology, and Social Equality together with the Israel Innovation Authority, is part of a five-year initiative to advance high-tech and science programs in Arab communities, and a wider government plan to allocate \$10 billion for Arab communities in fields like education, economic development, health, and crime-fighting.

Jerusalem Post

Coalition MK Calls on Gov't to Declare Houthis Terrorists

The government of Israel should declare the [Houthis](#) a terrorist organization in solidarity with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), MK Zvi Hauser (New Hope) proposed this week. The Yemeni Iran-sponsored militia has been steadily growing in its military capabilities over the past decade, and has begun to take an interest in regional affairs, Hauser warned in a letter to Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, Defense Minister Benny Gantz and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid. The letter came after the Houthis launched missile and drone attacks on Abu Dhabi and Dubai earlier this month, killing three people. Hauser pointed out that the Houthis have advanced weaponry, such as cruise missiles and Iranian UAVs, an intelligence-gathering fleet and the ability to strike targets at sea. [Dig Deeper "US Warns Against Travel to UAE, Cites Houthi Rebel Threat; Herzog Set to Fly Sunday"](#) (Times of Israel)

Times of Israel

White House Official: US, Iran 'in Ballpark' of Nuclear Deal

A senior White House official said that the United States and Iran are "in the ballpark of a possible [nuclear] deal" in Vienna, while also clarifying that Washington is "very prepared" for the "pretty likely" scenario that there won't be an agreement. Iran and world powers are in the midst of an eighth round of negotiations aimed at reviving the tattered 2015 nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Former president Donald Trump withdrew from the deal in 2018, launching a "maximum pressure" sanctions campaign, which Tehran responded to with escalating violations of the multilateral accord. Trump's successor, US President Joe Biden, is seeking a joint US-Iran return to compliance with the JCPOA, but has been met by a new, more hardline Iranian president in Ebrahim Raisi, who has demanded the removal of all US sanctions in exchange for the Islamic Republic's return to the deal. Asked to comment on the status of negotiations in Vienna during a virtual event hosted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, White House National Security Council coordinator for the Middle East Brett McGurk said, "We're in the ballpark of a possible deal. But again, I'm not going to put odds on this. There's [also] a very real chance that these talks could collapse very soon."

Saudi Group Touts Plan to Improve Russia Economic Ties

An alliance of Saudi businesses called for improving economic relations with Russia. The chairman of the Federation of Saudi Chambers, Ajlan Al-Ajlan, said the alliance wants a “road map” to business with the Russian Federation. He specifically mentioned bilateral business councils, a digital platform to promote Russian and “Arab” products, removing regulations that hinder trade and more, the official Saudi Press Agency reported. Saudi Arabia is traditionally an ally of the US, but Russia has worked to improve its relations with the kingdom in recent years. Russia has tried to convince Saudi Arabia to buy its S-400 missile defense system, for example. Saudi Arabia and Russia also cooperate on global oil production and price regulation. Ajlan made the comments at the Expo 2020 Dubai cultural forum during an event dedicated to improving business ties between Russia and the Arab world. During the event, he also highlighted his desire to see Russian banks open branches in Saudi Arabia and a direct navigation route for cargo between Saudi Arabia and Russia, among other things, according to the agency. Establishing an alternative global shipping route to the Suez Canal is a major priority for Russia. The Federation of Saudi Chambers is a network of businesses in Saudi Arabia. It was formed by a royal decree in 1980.

‘Egypt Is a Big Cell’ Says Freed Activist Ramy Shaath

As Egyptian-Palestinian activist Ramy Shaath denounced [Egypt](#) as "a big cell" weeks after his release from jail and departure for France, saying he was determined to keep fighting for the Palestinian cause despite threats against his family. "Egypt today is a big cell and we were in a much smaller one," Shaath said in Paris after almost two-and-a-half years in prison. "It's becoming a terror state in every sense of the word," he added. The 50-year-old was a prominent figure of the 2011 uprising in Egypt and the coordinator of the country's chapter of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel. He was arrested in July 2019 on charges of aiding a "terrorist organization." But Shaath said that of the hundreds of people with whom he shared cramped, crowded cells during his incarceration, "all of them had the same exact accusation with absolutely no proof, no substance, no incidence, nothing." "Just a few words they tell you and that is enough to keep you in detention." Shaath said that at first, his fellow prisoners were mostly civil society activists or Islamist supporters of groups including the Muslim Brotherhood, which held power from 2011-13 before being removed by the military. [Dig Deeper “Egypt Reforms Prisons and Highlights Rights, in Moves Critics Call Hollow” \(Reuters\)](#)

Infection Going Up a Rung

By Sarit Rosenblum

- **Thousands of families in Israel received a special gift in the last few days from the IDF: a soldier with Covid. Each of these soldiers, who became infected in the army, was summarily sent home to quarantine until they recovered. Despite its problematic history of shirking its medical responsibility for those who serve in its ranks, the IDF has no logistical and medical way to treat tens of thousands of sick soldiers, even if most of them are in light condition. It is quite easy to understand the need to separate the sick soldiers from their comrades and send them to quarantine at home. The fact that a great many of them then infect their entire families, some of whom belong to high-risk groups, is a direct continuation of the extreme and consistent negligence displayed by the IDF, from the start the pandemic to this day, in how it has handled its battle against Covid. Early this month, the IDF updated its instructions on how to behave during the fifth wave.**
- **It was decided that units would work in pods and in shifts and that a quarantine compound be set aside for sick soldiers. But in practice, these instructions are not implemented. In most of the bases, there is no division into capsules, and even in places where capsules are ordered, nobody bothers to make sure they are implemented, not in training and not in living quarters. Even the instruction to wear masks indoors, the most basic measure to prevent infection, is only enforced very partially. As for ventilation and filtration, that is not even discussed. Parents have complained recently about sick and healthy soldiers being together, sick soldiers who continue their tasks, blatantly disregarding the possibility of infection, and the fact that soldiers who are confirmed to have Covid are sometimes sent home on public transportation, risking the safety of the civilians they are supposed to protect. The main problem is not how the sick are treated, but that nothing is being done to prevent infection on the bases. Although the crowded living quarters in IDF bases create an ideal environment for spreading infection, there is no testing protocol and no way to identify asymptomatic cases. Soldiers who are exposed to confirmed Covid cases are not tested. Furthermore, dozens of parents of soldiers to whom I spoke say there is a shortage of simple antigen tests.**
- **The absence of a testing routine making it possible to identify the infected quickly and isolate them sabotages the only chance of severing the chain of infection and has caused entire units to become infected and sent home. There have been several examples of such mass infection in the last few weeks. Somewhere back at the start of the pandemic, in Italy, it was the young people, the age of our soldiers, who spread the virus throughout the country and jammed the hospitals, forcing them to choose which of the patients to intubate and which to let die. Almost two years later, in Israel during the fifth wave, our young people—the schoolchildren whose quarantine protocol was canceled with no real substitute, and our soldiers—have unwillingly become the Omicron variant's jet engine. Even those of us who make great efforts to avoid infection will receive a shipment of the virus with express mail, straight from kindergarten, school, or the army.**

Justice and Spins

By Sima Kadmon

- **Here's a question: what does Omicron have to do with the Netanyahu trials? Or more accurately: what is the connection between the new testing protocol, which cancels school quarantines, and the collapse of Netanyahu's plea bargain with Mandelblit early this week? What connection could there ostensibly be between an epidemiological subject and a legal one, between a pandemic that affects the entire Israeli public and a personal matter whose ramifications concern one man? Well, there is a connection, a classic example of how the most sensitive topic can be taken and spun. The whole point of the spin is to distract attention from an item on the agenda. This is about the clip that Netanyahu posted early this week, the one where he accused the Bennett government of having "decided to switch to infecting all of Israel's children en masse.**
- **No quarantines, no enforcement, no orderly testing—everyone will get infected."** Netanyahu said further, "And these children will infect the teaching staff, and then they'll go home and keep infecting [others]. This is a real danger," as if he were warning about the end of humanity. "This failed government is marching there with its eyes wide open and zero decisions." It's very easy to know that this is a spin. First of all, because of the timing. When the arrangement to cancel quarantines [for schoolchildren] was reported last Thursday, Netanyahu didn't react. Back then he was completely immersed in the plea bargain negotiations. He woke up only once it became clear to him that the deal had collapsed (and as opposed to how he tried to depict it, it wasn't he who backed out of it, but the attorney general), and he looked around for something that could light a fire and stir fear and panic.
- **Something that affects everyone, something to talk about. He spotted an opportunity in the new arrangement. We know that Netanyahu spoke with someone (so say sources close to Bennett) and decided to start a campaign on all the media channels. His messages were repeated verbatim by his mouthpieces and bots. You can rest assured that if the scandalous plea bargain had made any progress, there would have been no film clip, and the last thing Netanyahu would have cared about is school quarantines. And what did the media talk about this week? About quarantining children, whether or not to postpone the new arrangement by a week. The messages were pretty uniform and came from all kinds of sources, reascending when Israel Teachers Union Chairwoman Yaffa Ben David announced that she objected to the arrangement and called on teachers not to go to school. Yaffa Ben David is a forceful woman, some would say aggressive.**
- **When the goal is to look out for the public she represents, that is not necessarily a drawback per se. The question is whether it's justified to immediately fire the weapon of a strike, particularly when her opposition is all about health. Interestingly, when Danny Kushmaro told her in an interview last night that Omicron is not like other variants of the coronavirus that we've known, she dismissively waved off his remarks and said she wasn't in healthcare.**

- **If you aren't "in healthcare," Yaffa Ben David, on what basis have you decided to paralyze the schools? Just because you had a few phone calls with doctors who told you they were afraid of [the prospect of] ending quarantines (unlike other doctors, hospital directors, and experts, incidentally)? If you aren't "in healthcare," who do you think you are to decide which medical advice to accept? Who are you to violate directives from the prime minister, the Health Ministry's director general, the health minister and the education minister?**
- **No wonder the labor court did not support you and issued injunctions, without even ordering mediation. Unbelievable, but when the entire country is groaning under the impact of quarantines, when parents are yearning to go to work but are prevented from doing so because their children are in quarantine, when study after study has shown the damage that quarantines cause children and young people and how critical ending them is for their mental health, quarantine is a vacation as far as Ben David is concerned. And if you bring teachers out of quarantine, they should be paid a bonus. We're going for it, Bennett said yesterday. I'm not blinking. From my standpoint, it's fine for public bureaucrats to state their position. I even encourage it. But at the end of the day, once the decision is made, you toe the line.**