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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

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Ynet News

Israel's Culture Minister Cuts Funding for Events on Shabbat

Culture Minister Miki Zohar announced he was cutting all funding to events taking place on Shabbat. The decision will impact events funded by his predecessor, particularly in secular towns and communities situated far from the center of Israel, including free entry to historic sites and subsidies for theatre performances. "The observant population will not be discriminated against on my watch," Zohar said. Zohar assumes his role as minister in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right and religious government, which had announced a string of [controversial policy](#) changes raising the ire of some Israelis. Communication Minister Shlomo Karhi said he seeks to close the public broadcasting network Kan and divert its funding to the privately owned networks. He instructed Kan to make its produced content available at no cost to the commercial networks. [Read More "UTJ Submits Bill to Ban Hametz From Hospitals During Passover" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Times of Israel

Coalition Warns AG Any Move to Suspend PM Akin to Coup

In the latest drama to unfold between the Israeli government and the justice system, the heads of the coalition sent a scathing letter to Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara over reports she was considering ordering Prime Minister Netanyahu to take a leave of absence, with party heads warning her that such a move would be tantamount to a coup. Shortly after the letter was sent, Baharav-Miara denied reports that she had discussed the prospect. Media outlets had claimed the attorney general was weighing the issue due to the government's plans to overhaul the judiciary. They claimed Baharav-Miara viewed this as a potential breach of conflict of interest by the premier, as he cannot be involved in matters that might impact his ongoing criminal trial for corruption. [Dig Deeper "Lapid: President Considering My Idea to Set up Panel for 'Balanced' Judicial Reform" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ha'aretz

US Secretary of State Blinken to Visit Israel

United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken will arrive in Israel next Monday to meet with Israeli leaders. He will be the second senior US official to visit Israel since the new government was sworn in on December 29. US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Isaac Herzog last week. In his meeting with Netanyahu to prepare for Blinken's arrival, Sullivan brought up plans to change the judiciary. They and other senior officials discussed Iran's nuclear program, contacts with the Palestinians, and expanding the Abraham Accords. The visit was intended to refresh relations with the new government against the background of the extreme positions of its senior officials. [Read More "Jewish Dems Make Rare Condemnation of Israeli Government" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Nides: US Uses Democracy as Talking Point To Defend Israel

Israeli democracy plays a critical role for the US in its defense of the Jewish state and is one of the foundations of the ties between the two countries, US Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides said. "The US-Israel relationship is based upon lot of things. Democracy [and] shared values are certainly at the top of the list," Nides said. "We use those shared values to defend Israel at places like the United Nations," where it is "one of our big talking points," adding that the Biden administration explains that Israel is "a democracy in the Middle East, where there is no other. It is very important for everyone to understand" that these shared values are "a very big part of our messaging," Nides added. [Read More: AJC Chief: Changing Law of Return Would Send Wrong Message](#) (Israel Hayom)

Israeli MKs Demand Clearance of Bedouin Encampment

Two influential Israeli lawmakers demanded the clearance of a Bedouin encampment near Jerusalem, reigniting a years-long battle over the site and urging Prime Minister Netanyahu to defy international pressure. [Khan al-Ahmar](#) has been at the heart of a battle over land rights in the West Bank for years, with international bodies, including the European Union urging Israel not to evacuate the site and move its inhabitants out by force. But the election of a new government which includes nationalist right-wing parties determined to expand Israeli settlements in the West Bank, has brought new pressure to clear the encampment. "All the necessary permissions are on the table, including the approval of the Supreme Court of Israel; it's just up to the defense minister and the prime minister to decide," said Yuli Edelstein, a Knesset deputy and chairman of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee who joined Danny Danon, a member of Netanyahu's Likud party and former envoy to the United Nations. [Dig Deeper "PM: We'll Fight 'Illegal Building' in West Bank, Israeli & Palestinian"](#) (Times of Israel)

Dermer Makes Secret Visit to UAE Ahead of Netanyahu Trip

Israel's Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer made a secret visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), according to the Israeli news site Walla. The report stated that one of the main goals of the trip was to discuss a possible visit by Prime Minister Netanyahu, who has been scheduled to visit Abu Dhabi multiple times, including in 2021 when he was last in the Prime Minister's Office, but ultimately did not make the journey. Netanyahu was expected to visit the Gulf nation in the first few weeks of his new government, but the trip was canceled following a visit to Jerusalem's Temple Mount/Haram Al-Sharif by National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir. The UAE joined other Arab countries in condemning the event, including Jordan, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, who all issued statements criticizing the first ascent to the flashpoint holy site by a government minister in five years. Dermer's visit to the UAE is the first by a member of Netanyahu's new governing coalition. [Read More "Israel Allows Palestinian Cleric Probed for Incitement to Fly to Morocco"](#) (Times of Israel)

EU Widens Iran Sanctions List in Response to Crackdown

The European Union imposed [sanctions](#) on dozens of Iranian officials and organizations, including a government minister, regional governors, and lawmakers, suspected in the security crackdown on protestors, but did not add Iran's Revolutionary Guard to its terror group blacklist. At a meeting in Brussels, EU foreign ministers agreed to slap a travel ban and asset freeze on Iran's Sports and Youth Minister Hamid Sajjadi, accusing him of pressuring Iran's athletes into silence, including an Iranian climber who competed without Islamic headdress at a competition in Seoul. The Iranian Special Police Forces were also targeted, accused of using "excessive violence and lethal force against unarmed protestors, including women and children ... by firing automatic weapons at protestors." Companies linked to cyber security, spyware, social media filtering, and the production of security equipment allegedly used in the crackdown were also hit. Restrictive measures were slapped on senior officers from the Revolutionary Guard and some of its regional units. [Read More "US, Israel Kick off Largest Ever Military Exercise as Iran Nuclear Talks Falter" \(AI-Monitor\)](#)

AI-Monitor

Lebanon's Army 'on Alert' Over Border Tension with Israel

The Lebanese army has been on alert since after Israeli forces advanced outside the technical fence located at the border between the two countries. Lebanon's National News Agency reported that two Israeli Bucklin bulldozers, a D9 bulldozer, an armored personnel carrier, and an infantry force approached the technical fence near Hounin Valley. The bulldozers were stopped as they were carrying out excavation works near the border and approaching the Blue Line. This is not the first incident that has been reported recently. The Lebanese army shot at an Israeli drone that crossed into Lebanese airspace in mid-January. Tensions are prevalent between Lebanon and Israel along the Blue Line in southern Lebanon. A land boundary demarcation line instilled by the United Nations in 2000 acts like a temporary buffer zone between the two countries. Today, it is protected by the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, stationed in the area since 1978. The area often witnesses cross-border skirmishes between the two sides as the Lebanese repeatedly accuse Israel of violating its airspace and territorial waters. In October, Lebanon and Israel, through US mediation, delineated their maritime border after two years of indirect negotiations. The two countries are still technically at war and have no diplomatic relations, prohibiting any kind of contact between Lebanese and Israeli citizens. [Dig Deeper "Hezbollah Erects New Watchtowers on Lebanon Border as IDF Builds Defensive Wall" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Defense Ministry Power Struggle

By Yehuda Schlesinger

- The match that was made between Yoav Galant and Bezalel Smotrich by the coalition agreement hasn't produced a smooth marriage. The clash between the two ministers this past Friday over the Or Haim outpost only partially reflected the disagreements between them in the past two weeks in all that pertains to the division of powers within the Defense Ministry. Israel Hayom has learned that things became quite heated in the course of a three-way telephone conversation that the two ministers held with Prime Minister Netanyahu. The differences of opinion between Defense Minister Yoav Galant and Defense Ministry Minister Bezalel Smotrich about the division of powers between them regarding Judea and Samaria (West Bank) have been ongoing ever since the government was first formed.
- Smotrich has demanded to expedite the legal and administrative processes that are designed to grant him the powers over civilian life in the area, in keeping with the coalition agreement that was signed by the Likud and the Religious Zionist Party. Galant has been reluctant to concede those powers to Smotrich. Israel Hayom has learned that Smotrich demanded to speed up the establishment of a new administration that is to oversee all of the issues that pertain to civilian life in Judea and Samaria (West Bank).
- Galant demanded to be involved in establishing the administration, including in appointing the officials who are to serve in it. Smotrich, alternatively, demanded that Galant not be involved at all. On Friday, the day after the fraught telephone conversation that was held came the eviction of the outpost in Samaria. Galant is broadly perceived as having tried to teach Smotrich a lesson; he refrained from informing Smotrich about the eviction and ignored his demand to delay the outpost's removal to allow for dialogue. However, settler activists returned to the site and erected two structures but were evicted once again.
- In the past three weeks, Smotrich, Galant, and Netanyahu have met three times to reach an understanding on the division of labor and powers within the Defense Ministry. Smotrich has demanded that everything that pertains to civilian life in Judea and Samaria (West Bank) be taken out of the army's hands with the goal of making them as "normal" as possible and not have them subject to an organization that is controlled by the army. Military officials don't like that idea, and Galant has sided with the military on this issue. In the course of the meetings that were held, Galant said that he would need time to study the issue of separating civilian life in Judea and Samaria (West Bank) from the military establishment.
- Smotrich agreed to allow for an interim transitional period, and the two sides agreed on how things would be run during that interim period. However, tensions between the two ministers have been on the rise due to the lack of progress that has been made. Smotrich raised that issue at a meeting of the coalition faction leaders.

- Religious Zionist Party officials have accused Galant of sticking spokes in Smotrich's wheels in the Defense Ministry. Having said that, some of Smotrich's aides say that Smotrich has had no complaints about Galant [but rather about Netanyahu] since he reached his agreements with Netanyahu. Smotrich's aides said that Netanyahu should have clearly informed Galant about the agreements with Smotrich regarding his role in the Defense Ministry. Galant's office chose not to comment in response to questions. However, Defense Ministry officials told Israel Hayom that the processes in question are going to take time because of their complexity and said that Galant was not deliberately dragging his feet.

Save the Nation

By Ari Shavit

- On August 11, 2020, I sent Ruth Gavison an article that I published in this newspaper. The headline was, “Bibi, don’t go there,” and in it, I called on Prime Minister Netanyahu not to do the very things that he is now doing. “Not to form a powerful, fully right-wing government that will threaten the Jerusalem District Court.” Not to grow addicted to delusions of grandeur and to the sense that he is being crucified, and not to break the rules of the Israeli democratic game. It was no coincidence that I sent that article to Professor Gavison. Ruthie was my elder (ideological) sister. For 27 years, we walked side by side as we made our way out of Meretz’s left and into the Zionist center. I taught her about the flaws of the Oslo process, and she taught me about the Supreme Court’s failings. We were both opposed to extremism, and we both abhorred the hatred for Netanyahu.
- Together, we tried to lead the Association for Civil Rights in Israel toward liberalism instead of radicalism. Together, we tried to persuade our colleagues on the left that a good chunk of the arguments and complaints made by the right are valid. And together, we positioned Gavison as the leader of the opposition to Aharon Barak’s judicial revolution. Ruthie’s reaction to my article on Bibi was supportive. Like me, she felt that Netanyahu had been done a great injustice, but she was deeply concerned about the nature of his reaction to that injustice. In a brief WhatsApp correspondence between us, she analyzed the bind that we were all in and pondered what the right course forward should be. I argued that there was just one path forward: unity-calming-pardon. Gavison agreed with me, but she floored me when she wrote, “I’m in trouble in the hospital. You’re going to have to solve this problem without me.” When I wished her well and asked if I could help, Ruthie wrote to me what were her parting words: “It’s complicated. Help isn’t the problem. You, please save the nation.”
- Three days later, Gavison passed away. But her dying wishes have stayed with me. Not as it pertains to me personally but as it pertains to the country nationally. My big sister was wise and fair-minded. She foresaw the terrible trouble that is now gripping Israel. She anxiously watched the constitutional danse macabre that devolved into a war between political tribes. And she sought a middle ground, a third way. That gifted legal scholar believed that only if we were all prepared to listen to one another would we be able to avert the threat of internal destruction. As they embark on their imperious and destructive regime revolution, members of the radical right quote Gavison’s remarks about Aharon Barak and the Netanyahu trial. But Ruthie’s dying wish proves where she really stood. She didn’t like Barak’s revolution, but I am certain that she would have come out strongly against the Levin revolution. She warned against the inherent danger in judicial activism, but she abhorred the alternative of tyranny by the majority. If she were still with us, she would do her utmost to stop Netanyahu and Levin from going to the terrible place they are headed.

- She would do her utmost to have the relationship among the branches of government regulated through dialogue, compromise, and broad consensus. With fear and trembling, I am cautiously invoking the memory of that fair-minded, energetic, and brilliant Israeli woman. I am doing that because I know that she wouldn't have wanted a populist revolution; rather, that was the very thing she feared most. Two decades ago, Gavison, a conservative liberal, shared her fears that the Supreme Court's overreach would produce an angry revolt in which the bastion of the rule of law would be stormed with pitchforks in hand. And she was right. She was so very right. Therefore, at the dangerous moment we are currently living through, it is imperative that we return to the Gavison's true legacy.
- The only way forward at this critical juncture is the Gavison way. On the one hand, the Netanyahu government must accept the fact that the course it has charted will lead to chaos that will dismantle Israel from within while its enemies attack it from without. On the other, the justice system and its supporters have to understand that they made mistakes in the past and that they must engage in dialogue with their critics and propose an apt correction. Both camps need to come up with an agreed-upon path toward change. Gavison's final wishes may have been written to me, but they were addressed to all of us. You, please, save the nation.