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State prosecutor announces probe of Gantz's failed startup

Blue & White leader not implicated in police investigation into Fifth Dimension, where he was chairman before entering politics; Gantz denies wrongdoing, saying move 'sounds like political pressure' ahead of election in which he will face off against indicted Netanyahu

Ynet, Associated Press| Published: 02.20.20 , 22:05

Acting State Prosecutor Dan Eldad on Thursday ordered a criminal investigation into a failed high-tech startup headed by Blue & White leader Benny Gantz.

Gantz acted as chairman of the board for "Fifth Dimension," which went bankrupt, before going into politics. There have been no allegations made against Gantz.

State prosecutors confirmed in November 2019 that they had requested documents from the state comptrollers' office in order to begin an inquiry into the company, following a court petition by right-wing organization Lavi.

In a statement released Thursday night, the Justice Ministry said the police will conduct the investigation.

Gantz's Blue & White Party is in a tight race with the Likud party headed by caretaker prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has been charged with fraud, bribery and breach of trust following a series of corruption investigations.

The March 2 vote comes just two weeks before Netanyahu's trial is to begin.

Throughout the campaign, Gantz has tried to focus all attention on Netanyahu's legal troubles and presented himself as an honest and scandal-free alternative.

Netanyahu on Thursday evening praised the decision to investigate the company.

"The public must know the truth - here and now - and before the [March 2] election," said Netanyahu.

Earlier on Thursday, Gantz denied wrongdoing following reports of the pending investigation into his firm's financial dealings.

"It all sounds like political pressure to get this thing on the public's agenda," Gantz told Army Radio.

"I am totally at ease. This was checked in the past and no criminal suspicion was found."

Israel goes to the polls on March 2, the third vote in less than a year after two elections in 2019 ended inconclusively, with neither Netanyahu or Gantz able to forge a coalition government.

Pre-election surveys have predicted similar results in next month's vote, potentially extending the deadlock.

It's not clear if the reports over the affair will move the needle in any way. The months leading up to the campaign have been marked by other bombshells, including the unveiling of President Donald Trump's Mideast plan and the setting of a date for the beginning of Netanyahu's corruption trial, which have not dramatically affected opinion polls.

But it is an embarrassment for Gantz, a former military chief, who has made ousting Netanyahu his main message and has tried to present a squeaky clean image in the face of the long-serving leader's graft charges.

After retiring from the army, Gantz headed the cybersecurity company that entered talks with Israeli police over the sale of its product. According to the state comptroller, the police may have violated acquisition laws by forgoing a tender in its dealings with the company.

The Justice Ministry would not confirm the media reports, saying only that documents from the state comptroller were being looked into.

Netanyahu was charged last year with bribery, breach of trust and fraud in three cases in which he is accused of receiving lavish gifts from billionaire friends and of exchanging

regulatory favors with media moguls, including Ynet publisher Arnon Mozes, for more palatable media coverage of him and his family.

Netanyahu denies wrongdoing and claims the charges have been trumped up by a hostile justice system, police and media out to get him.

02.20.20 – Th -

IDF included women & immigrants as Orthodox recruits, to meet Haredi draft quotas

02.20.20 – Th -

IDF probe finds serious failures in data on Haredi draft

Internal inquiry commissioned by Kochavi says numbers of ultra-Orthodox inductees was vastly inflated, sometimes by more than 100%, cites 'data manipulation, deliberate and systematic violation of the law and severe professional negligence' by officers  
Itay Blumenthal, Kobi Nachsoni, Associated Press | Published: 02.20.20 , 19:31

An internal IDF probe into the draft of ultra-Orthodox men into the military in recent years has revealed a massive misrepresentation of the numbers of people actually inducted.

The conclusions by the commission, released Thursday, cited "data manipulation, deliberate and systematic violation of the law and severe professional negligence" on the part of the army.

According to the probe commissioned by IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi, the numbers of Haredi men drafted was vastly inflated, sometimes by more than 100%, in reports to the Knesset and Defense Ministry.

The findings led Kochavi to formally censure several IDF officers, including the head of the IDF's Manpower Directorate, Maj. Gen. Moti Almoz.

The commission of inquiry, which lasted for more than two months and was headed by Maj. Gen. (ret.) Roni Numa, found that the army failed to meet its recruitment goals from 2014 to 2018.

The army had previously said that ultra-Orthodox draft figures have surged.

The military launched the investigation after an expose by public broadcaster Kan in early December found that the military "doubled or even tripled" figures on the number of ultra-Orthodox men drafted in the past several years.

The law sets annual draft targets to be met by the Haredi community, defining as Haredi anyone who studied for at least two years at a religious institution between the ages of 14 and 18.

But the IDF personnel overseeing the draft process inflated the numbers of the ultra-Orthodox draftees by including people who were not members of the community.

The inquiry said the errors also stemmed in part from the lack of a clear, legal definition of who is ultra-Orthodox.

IDF Spokesperson Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus said some recruits, including women and newly arrived immigrants, were counted as ultra-Orthodox when they were clearly not.

The investigation instead found "serious, systemic failures that also related to professional capabilities as well as command responsibilities," Conricus told reporters.

Conricus said the errors stemmed from "severe professional negligence" within the Manpower Directorate.

"No direct instructions were given by senior commanders ... to manipulate or corrupt the data in any way or to provide false reports in order to meet recruitment goals," Conricus said.

"We did not find political pressure or financial motives."

Instead, he said personnel in the directorate "gave themselves a very liberal interpretation of the law and of what they could do, which resulted in a conscious, intentional and systematic behavior that went beyond the definitions of the law."

The inquiry found that the main motivation was to meet quotas.

The politically powerful ultra-Orthodox political parties have used their influence over the decades to protect draft exemptions that allowed young religious men to instead pursue religious studies in insular seminaries.

The exemptions, coupled with generous welfare subsidies for ultra-Orthodox men, have been a source of resentment among the Jewish secular majority, who are legally required to serve.

The change in the law was met with massive opposition by the Haredi community, which has staged multiple protests across Israel.

The ultra-Orthodox are also often schooled in separate systems that offer little of the core curriculum, leaving them ill-prepared for the modern workforce and breeding a culture of poverty.

Experts have long warned that the system is weighing down the economy and is unsustainable in the long run, calling on the government to integrate ultra-Orthodox men into the job market.

The now-discredited military effort to enlist young ultra-Orthodox men was seen as an important step in this process.

02.20.20 – Th -

Jerusalem plan to build in 3,000 houses west & 1,000 houses east after 8 year delay

02.20.20 – Th -

Netanyahu announces plan to build 3,000 houses in Jerusalem settlements

The announcement comes 8 years after the plan to build in Givat HaMatos was initially put forward but halted due to international pressure; 1,000 houses will also be built for Palestinians in Beit Safafa in East J'lem

Ynet| Published: 02.20.20 , 16:05

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday announced the construction of thousands of housing units in Israeli settlements in Jerusalem.

Netanyahu said there are plans for at least 4,000 houses to be build, with 3,000 of the units set to be constructed in the settlement of Givat HaMatos in south Jerusalem and another 1,000 in Beit Safafa, a Palestinian town in East Jerusalem, and is meant to benefit the local residents.

The announcement comes less than two weeks before the March 2 election and eight years since the plans for construction in the area had been put forward but halted due to international pressure.

"We are going to build the Givat Hamatos neighborhood, we have removed all of the impediments," said the prime minister from the nearby Har Homa settlement, which overlooks Givat HaMatos.

"I must say 1,000 of these will be put on the market immediately, in the coming days, by PMO Acting Director General Ronen Peretz," he said.

"The Arab residents have a housing problem for which we are providing a solution," he added, referring to the construction in Beit Safafa.

Netanyahu said the plan is meant to connect all parts of the "united" Jerusalem and establish a new Jewish neighborhood.

"Today, I announce the establishment of Har Homa Heh, a neighborhood in which we will build 2,200 residential units. This is another approximately 12,000 residents. Har Homa will be a neighborhood with around 50,000 residents. This is like an average-sized city in Israel, just in this neighborhood alone."

He said the decision was made despite "strong international opposition."

A spokesperson for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas slammed the plan shortly after Netanyahu's announcement.

"Netanyahu's insistence on building thousands of settlement units is the systematic destruction of the two-state solution and the implementation of the Trump plan," said Nabil Abu Rudeineh.

The United States last month announced a reversal of four decades of American policy, saying it no longer viewed Israel's settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as "inconsistent with international law".

02.20.20 – Th -

Fraud probe of Gantz Fifth Dimension staff on \$850 million from fake presentations

02.20.20 – Th -

Gantz slams government corruption amid criminal probe reports

Ex-military chief dismisses allegations of being involved in fraudulent conduct as a head of a cyber-tech company; Gantz reportedly not a suspect in the case set to be investigated by AG

Roi Rubinstein, i24NEWS | Published: 02.20.20, 11:04

Blue & White leader on Thursday criticized corrupt government officials just hours after reports emerged the State Prosecutor's Office may advise the attorney general to launch an investigation into the Fifth Dimension cybersecurity firm, headed by Benny Gantz until last year.

Gantz earlier denied wrongdoing in the case alleging shady business deals between the company and Israeli police. The reports say Gantz is not a suspect in the affair. But the development comes less than two weeks before national elections and during a campaign by Gantz' party that has tried to focus attention on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's indictment for corruption charges.

"It all sounds like political pressure to get this thing on the public's agenda," Gantz told Israeli Army Radio. "I am totally at ease. This was checked in the past and no criminal suspicion was found."

Hours later the opposition lawmaker spoke at an innovation event in Tel Aviv and vowed not to promote any law that will prevent the investigation of public figures if elected.

"I find the issue of corruption very disturbing. In recent years we've seen a president, a prime minister, and a chief rabbi go to prison. It breaks the public's trust in his elected officials," said Gantz. "I vow not to promote any law that will prevent the investigation of public figures. We will pass the authority to grant members of Knesset immunity to an external committee. I say all this because we have a prime minister who will move on March 17 from the prime minister's chair to the defendants' bench and I intend to replace him."

The investigation is not expected to begin until after the March 2 elections.

The probe will look into other personnel who are involved in the affair, who allegedly mislead the police with fake presentations in order to win a deal for the company.

The potential investigation would focus on the former employees at the Fifth Dimension, which filed bankruptcy in 2018, and whether they have violated any laws.

In March 2019, former-State Comptroller Yosef Shapira issued a report that detailed inconsistencies that were found in the purchase deals that the police have engaged in recent years - a sum that amounted to some \$850 million.

Netanyahu – whose corruption trial begins on March 17 – took a jab at Gantz and posted a tweet that read, “this is a sad evening for the State of Israel,” a tweet identical to another post Gantz had published just two days prior, after the opening date of Netanyahu's trial had been announced.

02.19.20 – We -

Netanyahu pledged 400 Ethiopians before elections, 43 will arrive to unite with family

02.19.20 – We -

Despite Netanyahu's efforts only 43 of the Falash Mura will arrive before elections

In his effort to pander for votes among the Ethiopian community, Netanyahu pledged to allow 8,000 of the Falsh Mura community to Israel despite concerns from his ultra-Orthodox coalition partners and his AG's warnings this politically motivated decision could wait until elections are over

Itamar Eichner | Published: 02.19.20 , 23:26

In an effort to pander to the voters in the Ethiopian community, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu promised to bring to Israel 8,000 Ethiopians of Jewish descent who have been waiting to be allowed in, and 400 of them within the next few weeks.

Of the hundreds promised, only 43 will arrive next week. They will arrive onboard a scheduled flight from Addis Ababa to Ben-Gurion airport whose passengers will also include Likud ministers and members of Knesset, including MK Desta "Gadi" Yevarkan, who recently changed his alliance from the Blue & White party to the ruling Likud.

Attorney General Avichai Mandelblitt advised the prime minister against the move, claiming it was politically motivated and could be postponed until after the elections, but Netanyahu was adamant he would go ahead.

Ministers then attacked Mandelblit, claiming he was insensitive to the families involved and would have ruled differently had his brother been among those barred from entry. However, under current restrictions and the government criteria, only dozens of people were found suitable. They will be required to undergo a medical examination to eliminate the risk of diseases such as tuberculosis that is prevalent in Ethiopia.

The Falash Mura are a community in Ethiopia and Eritrea whose forebears converted to Christianity during the 19th and 20th centuries. Many have relatives in Israel and have been trying to obtain permission to immigrate for decades, but have hitherto been denied because they are not considered to be Jewish.

Netanyahu's coalition partner and head of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, Arye Deri, who heads Interior Ministry, had agreed to Netanyahu's pledge to bring 400 of the Falash Mura community to Israel but opposes any attempt to raise that number to eight thousand. Blue & White leader Benny Gantz has said he thought the entire community waiting in Ethiopia should be allowed into Israel to unite with family already here and would work to that end should he be elected prime minister in the March 2 ballot.

The efforts to bring this community to Israel have been going on for many years and have failed in the past decade because of the policies of the same Benjamin Netanyahu.

02.17.20 – Tu -

United Arab Emirates licensed for first nuclear power plant in the Arab world

02.17.20 – Tu -

UAE issues licence for first Arab nuclear power plant

Barakah plant had been due to come online since 2017 but faced delays attributed to safety and regulatory requirements; experts fear plant will be vulnerable to attacks from rival Iran

AFP| Published: 02.17.20 , 19:09

The United Arab Emirates said Monday it has issued an operating license for a reactor at its Barakah nuclear power plant, the first in the Arab world, hailing it as a "new chapter."

The UAE has substantial energy reserves, but with a power-hungry population of 10 million, it has made huge investments in developing alternative power sources including solar.

"Today marks a new chapter in our journey for the development of peaceful nuclear energy with the issuing of the operating license for the first Barakah plant," Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan said in a tweet.

"As we prepare for the next 50 years to safeguard our needs, our biggest strength is national talent."

The Barakah plant, located on the Gulf coast west of the capital, had been due to come online in late 2017 but faced a number of delays that officials attributed to safety and regulatory requirements.

The national nuclear regulator has now given the green light to the first of four reactors at the plant, Hamad al-Kaabi, the UAE representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), told a press conference.

Abu Dhabi authorities said in January that the plant would start operating within a few months. No new date was given on Monday but Kaabi indicated it would happen soon. "The full operation of Barakah plant in the near future will contribute to the UAE's efforts for development and sustainability," he said, adding that the operator would "undertake a period of commissioning to prepare for commercial operation".

The plant is a regional first - Saudi Arabia, the world's top oil exporter, has said it plans to build up to 16 nuclear reactors, but the project has yet to materialize.

It is being built by a consortium led by the Korea Electric Power Corporation at a cost of some \$24.4 billion.

When fully operational, the four reactors have the capacity to generate 5,600 megawatts of electricity, around 25 percent of the nation's needs. The remaining three reactors are almost ready.

As well as generating competitively priced electricity, the UAE also hopes the nuclear plant will elevate its status as a key regional player, building on its success in establishing itself as a center for tourism, banking and services.



"This is part of the UAE's drive to diversify its energy economy, reduce dependence on fossil fuels, and project its image as a regional leader in science and technology," one Gulf analyst told AFP.

Other headline initiatives include a homegrown space program, which saw the first Emirati astronaut sent into space last year, and plans to launch a probe to Mars.

Concerns in volatile Gulf

The Barakah plant is situated on the Emirates coast, separated from Iran by the troubled Gulf waters. It is just 50 kilometers (30 miles) from the border of Saudi Arabia and is closer to the Qatari capital Doha than it is to Abu Dhabi.

Amid a confrontation between Iran and the United States over Tehran's nuclear ambitions, the UAE has said it will not be developing a uranium enrichment program or nuclear reprocessing technologies.

But relations between Iran and the UAE, a staunch U.S. ally, have been strained as Washington pursues a "maximum pressure" policy against Tehran and accuses it of attacking oil tankers in Gulf waters.

Energy giant Saudi Aramco was the target of a missile and drone attack in September that knocked out half of its production. The strike was claimed by Yemen's Iran-backed Huthi rebels but Washington accused Tehran of carrying it out.

"The 2019 attack on Aramco highlighted the vulnerability of the Gulf's energy infrastructure to external attacks," said the Gulf analyst, who declined to be named due to the sensitivity of the issue.

"The heightened pitch of regional tensions between Iran on the one hand, and the US and its allies on the other, increases the vulnerability of new energy infrastructure to the possibility of such attacks."

Asked what authorities have done to protect the plant from attack, Kaabi said that such concerns were factored in during the development of the project which was 12 years in the making.

"That not only includes the design of the reactor in terms of safety, but also security, including measures associated with emergency, measures associated with readiness during normal operation and during accidents or incidents," he told AFP.

Asked whether the plant had the potential to worsen relations with regional rivals like Iran and Qatar - which has said the plant poses a "flagrant threat to regional peace and the environment" - he defended the UAE's track record on transparency.

02.21.20 – Fr -

Arab Human rights lawyers Sue \$43.8 million; Jerusalem Taxi App that Filters drivers

02.21.20 – Fr -

Israeli Taxi App Gett Sued for Allegedly Letting Jerusalem Users Filter Out Arab Drivers 'Mehadrin' service gives users option to only ride in cabs that don't operate on Shabbat, but attorneys and drivers allege that its true purpose is to hail cabs driven by Jews

Feb 21, 2020 4:47 PM

Israeli cab-hailing app Gett is being sued by human rights lawyers in Jerusalem for offering a service that discriminates against Arab taxi drivers, British newspaper the Guardian reported Friday.

The 150 million shekel (\$43.8 million) class-action lawsuit against the company, its CEO Dave Waiser and Gett Israel head Mark Oun, alleges that the app's Jerusalem-based "Mehadrin" option, named after the strictest level of kosher regulations, purposefully filters out Arab drivers from a user's search.

The option's stated purpose is to offer riders a taxi that is guaranteed not to be driven on Shabbat. Although Gett alleges that drivers of any religion can meet the option's standards, Arab Muslim and Christian drivers in Jerusalem will often work during the Jewish Sabbath.

Attorney Asaf Pink, who is working on the case, along with the Israeli Reform movement's legal arm Israel Religious Action Center, investigated the service before launching the suit. The investigation's report stated that in October 2018, two people were sent to pose as prospective drivers to meet with Herzl Moshe, Gett's Jerusalem representative. While meeting with him, Herzl, who was being surreptitiously recorded, said that the Mehadrin service is not intended for religious Jews, but rather "for people who don't want an Arab driver."

"When my daughter wants to travel, I order her a Gett Mehadrin," he said. "She doesn't care if the driver is religious or not because what she wants is a Jewish driver."

He allegedly told the undercover investigators that he would never hire an Arab driver for the Mehadrin service, the Guardian reported. The investigation firm also sent an Arab man to see if he could sign up for the service as a driver, who was turned away.

The lawsuit will also argue that despite Gett's claims, there is no Jewish basis for the Mehadrin option. There is no prohibition on a Jewish person riding the cab of a non-Jewish driver who also drives on Shabbat.

"They give it a religious title," Pink told the Guardian, "but, in fact, this is a proxy for a racist service that provides taxis with Jewish drivers. Of course, they can't just say 'we don't want Arabs.'"