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Iran is significantly reducing the scope of its forces in Syria's civil war

05.18.20

Bennett says Iran starting to withdraw from Syria

Speaking during a ceremony welcoming his successor Gantz, Israel's outgoing defense minister said Iran, which is struggling financially due to sanctions and coronavirus, has evacuated 'a number of bases' in the region

Reuters| Published: 05.18.20 , 20:54

Iran has begun withdrawing its forces from Syria, Israel's outgoing defense minister said on Monday, without offering any evidence to support his assertion.

Naftali Bennett also urged his successor, Benny Gantz, to maintain pressure on Iran, adding that the trend might otherwise reverse.

Iran, Israel's arch-enemy in the Middle East, has been a key supporter, along with Russia, of President Bashar al-Assad during Syria's civil war, sending military advisers as well as material and regional Shi'ite militias that it backs.

Israel, which monitors neighbouring Syria intensively, has carried out hundreds of air strikes in Syria targeting suspected arms and troop movements by Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah guerrillas it sponsors.

"Iran is significantly reducing the scope of its forces in Syria and even evacuating a number of bases," said Bennett in his valedictory address. "Though Iran has begun the withdrawal process from Syria, we need to complete the work. It's in reach."

Israeli officials have suggested in the past that Israel's military operations were showing signs of success.

Iran, which is struggling economically under the burden of U.S. sanctions and has also been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic, has repeatedly said its military presence in Syria is at the invitation of Assad's government and that it will remain in Syria as long as its help is needed.

A senior aide to Iran's foreign minister, Ali-Ashgar Khaji, reiterated on Saturday that Tehran would continue working closely with the Assad government and Russia to combat terrorism and find a political solution to the Syrian crisis, Iran's ISNA news agency reported.

Bennett held the position of **Israeli defense minister** for about half a year.

His successor, **Gantz**, a former armed forces chief and leader of the centrist Blue and White Party, has formed a unity government with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, which **took office on Sunday**.

05.18.20 – Mo - - -

No masks for kids, only teaching staff in Israel heatwave, no new cases or deaths

05.18.20

Israeli doctors: No masks for kids during heatwave

Israel Pediatric Association says **requiring school children to wear masks during scorching temperatures** for long hours is 'impractical' and 'a significant burden'; adds effectiveness of masks in preventing coronavirus spread among children is unclear
Dr. Itay Gal | Published: **05.18.20**, 18:05

School **children should not be forced to wear face masks during the hot days of summer** despite health regulations meant to prevent coronavirus infections, the **Israel Pediatric Association on Monday**.

In the statement, the pediatrics association urged the health and education ministries to **revoke the Health Ministry order** in the wake of the **unusual heatwave** that hit the country on **Sunday**.

"During this current heatwave, requiring children to wear masks for long hours is impractical and a significant burden, masks that get wet from sweat will become ineffective," read the statement. "Therefore, we believe children should be exempt from wearing masks until this heatwave ends."

According to the association's experts, the effectiveness of face masks in preventing coronavirus **spread among children is unclear** and there **is no evidence** in the scientific literature **to support the Health Ministry's claims**.

Moreover, **most data shows that coronavirus does not spread among children as rapidly as among adults**, and the American Center for Disease Control (CDC) **recommends only teaching staff in schools wears protective masks**.

Also on Monday, **Israel has seen no new cases of coronavirus or deaths in a 12-hour period for the first time since the onset of the pandemic**. The current COVID-19 **death toll stands at 272**.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, 16,621 people have been infected by the virus in Israel, while 13,014 people have already recovered.

05.18.20 – Mo - - -

China ambassador Du Wei died of cardiac arrest at home north of Tel Aviv Sunday.

05.18.20

China to send team to Israel to repatriate envoy's body

Chinese officials, who are due in the coming days, initially said they would send forensic experts to investigate the death of Ambassador Du Wei, but later went back on the claims, accepting the findings of Israeli specialists

AFP, Ynet | Published: 05.18.20, 16:37

China is sending a team to Israel to repatriate the body of its ambassador who died at his home in Tel Aviv, reportedly from natural causes, an Israeli diplomatic source said Monday.

The Chinese officials were due in Israel "in the coming days" said the source, requesting anonymity.

The officials initially had said they would send a team of Chinese forensic experts to investigate the envoy's death, but later went back on that statement, saying they accept the conclusion reached by Israeli medical specialists.

It was not clear whether they would have to enter mandatory 14-day coronavirus quarantine before being cleared for movement within Israel.

Late ambassador Du Wei was 57 when he was found dead at his home in Herzliya, north of Tel Aviv, on Sunday.

Police said he died due to cardiac arrest. Du was found in his bed by his housekeeper after the ambassador failed to attend breakfast.

Israel sent forensic experts and police to the scene as part of normal diplomatic procedure, police said.

China's foreign ministry said Sunday that "health reasons" were the presumed cause of Du's death but that a definitive finding had not yet been reached.

05.18.20 – Mo - - -

Israel sizzles in unprecedented heat as temps expected to reach 45-49°C. 113-120°F

05.18.20

Israel sizzles in unprecedented heat as temps soar over 40°C

Meteorological event never before recorded in the spring is expected to continue until the end of the week, with mercury set to rise to 45-49°C; extreme heat sends locals rushing to the beachfront to cool off, despite coronavirus regulations still in place until Wednesday

Ynet | Published: 05.18.20, 14:11

Israel continued to face an unprecedented and possibly historic heatwave on Monday, as temperatures soared across the country accompanied by unusually dry conditions.

The extreme heat sent Israelis rushing to the beach, despite strict guidelines to counter the spread of the coronavirus.

Although beaches are only set to officially reopen on Wednesday, many could be seen swimming in the sea and sunbathing on the beachfront, both of which are prohibited under the current Health Ministry orders.

Temperatures are expected to reach abnormal heights ranging from 40 to 44°C on the coastal plain, lowlands and the northern Negev.

In the Jordan Valley and the Arava, temperatures were expected to reach from 45 to no less than 49°C. 113-120°F

Despite the heavy heat, Monday afternoon may see light local rain in the Arava and southern Negev, accompanied by thunderstorms and strong winds.

No relief is forecast in temperatures in the coming days. On Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday the extreme heat will continue.

The Meteorological Service said that temperatures throughout the country on Sunday reached more than 40°C, 104°F with some regions seeing temperatures of more than 45°C. 113°F

One of the communities destined to feel the brunt of this heatwave is the West Bank settlement of Gilgal, near Jericho, where temperatures are expected to reach 48°C. Itzik Adari, who lives Gilgal said that the extremely warm weather is a challenge for the residents, both for their work in agriculture and their day to day lives.

"You can't get used to this kind of heat," said Adari. "Whoever works in farming, which is 70% of the people who live here, only start their working day around 5pm."

According to meteorologists, such a prolonged heat is uncommon during spring months (April to mid-June), as heatwaves during this season are usually associated with low-pressure areas and are therefore short.

The current phenomenon can be associated with high atmospheric pressure compared to the surrounding environment, associated with a low-pressure system found northward of the southern Red Sea.

As such, the current heat will most likely be prolonged with a continued rise in temperatures.

According to the Meteorological Service, the high temperatures are expected to last six days.

This is an unprecedented event in Israel, where there has never been a six-day heatwave with temperatures of more than 38°C in recorded history.

Coalition annexation opportunity to vote in the Knesset or the cabinet as soon as July 1

05.18.20

Ashkenazi says Trump peace plan is an 'historic opportunity' for Israel

Incoming top diplomat states that all actions will be taken 'responsibly', in full coordination with the U.S., and in line with all previous peace treaties signed by Jerusalem

Itamar Eichner | Published: 05.18.20, 12:44

Incoming Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi called U.S. President Donald Trump's Mideast peace plan on Monday a "historic opportunity" to shape Israel's borders, but stopped short of explicitly mentioning a possible annexation of West Bank territory.

The outline, which was presented in January, promotes the establishment of a Palestinian state on some 70 percent of the West Bank, pockmarked with settlement enclaves that would be annexed to Israel.

Sitting next to his predecessor as Israel's top diplomat, incoming Finance Minister Israel Katz, Ashkenazi said the administration's plan will be advanced "responsibly, with full coordination with the United States and maintaining all of the State of Israel's peace agreements and strategic interests."

"We have a duty to ensure we distance our citizens from the risk of war and pursue peace," he said.

Many in the international community opposed Prime Minister Netanyahu's plan to unilaterally annex large parts of the Jordan Valley.

Netanyahu announced his intention in advance of the September elections. According to the coalition agreement, he would be able to bring the annexation to a vote in the Knesset or the cabinet as soon as July 1.

"I see great importance in strengthening the ties with the countries with which we have peace, Egypt and Jordan," Ashkenazi stated. "They are the most important allies in dealing with regional challenges."

The comment came several days after Jordan's King Abdullah II said there will be a "massive" confrontation between Israel and Jordan if the former annexes the Jordan Valley. Asked if he would end the peace treaty with Israel, Abdullah said he doesn't "want to make threats and create an atmosphere of controversy, but we're considering every option."

05.18.20 – Mo - - -

UK evangelical TV effort to convert Israel is very touchy, viewed as deeply offensive

05.18.20

'GOD TV' spat exposes tensions between Israel, evangelicals

U.S. broadcaster who boasted of miraculously securing TV license in Israel risks being taken off the air over suspicions of trying to convert Jews; Jewish state long welcomed Christians' political and financial support, but most Jews view conversion efforts as deeply offensive

Associated Press | Published: 05.18.20, 10:38

An evangelical broadcaster who boasted of miraculously securing a TV license in Israel now risks being taken off the air over suspicions of trying to convert Jews to Christianity.

The controversy over "GOD TV" has put both Israel and its evangelical Christian supporters in an awkward position, exposing tensions the two sides have long papered over.

Evangelical Christians, particularly in the United States, are among the strongest supporters of Israel, viewing it as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, with some seeing it as the harbinger of a second coming of Jesus Christ and the end of days.

Israel has long welcomed evangelicals' political and financial support, especially as their influence over the White House has risen during the Trump era, and it has largely shrugged off concerns about any hidden religious agenda.

But most Jews view any effort to convert them to Christianity as deeply offensive, a legacy of centuries of persecution and forced conversion at the hands of Christian rulers. In part because of those sensitivities, evangelical Christians, who generally believe salvation can only come through Jesus and preach the Gospel worldwide, rarely target Jews.

When GOD TV, an international Christian broadcaster, reached a seven-year contract earlier this year with HOT, Israel's main cable provider, it presented itself as producing content for Christians.

But in a video message that has since been taken down, GOD TV CEO Ward Simpson suggested its real aim was to convince Jews to accept Jesus as their messiah. The channel, known as "Shelanu," broadcast in Hebrew even though most Christians in the Holy Land speak Arabic.

"God has supernaturally opened the door for us to take the Gospel of Jesus into the homes and lives and hearts of his Jewish people," Simpson said in the video.

"They'll watch secretly, they'll watch quietly," he added. "God is restoring his people, God is removing the blindness from their eyes."

In a subsequent video, Simpson acknowledged that the channel was under investigation by Israeli authorities, saying that preaching about Jesus in Israel is a "very touchy subject." He apologized for any offensive remarks and said GOD TV would comply with all regulations.

Freedom of religion is enshrined in Israeli law, and proselytizing is allowed as long as missionary activities are not directed at minors and do not involve economic coercion.

The Communications Ministry said it was investigating a "discrepancy" between the application for the license that was granted in March, which said the channel was focused on the Christian community, and its actual content, which appears to "target Jews and convince them that Jesus is the messiah."

HOT said in a statement that it was not responsible for the channel's content and has been "fully transparent" with authorities.

GOD TV was founded in the UK in 1995 and eventually grew into a 24-hour network with offices in several countries. Its international broadcasting licenses are held by a Florida-based nonprofit. It claims to reach 300 million households worldwide, and Simpson was among the participants at a high-level Christian media summit hosted by Israel last year.

Simpson denied trying to convert Jews to Christianity. He said Jews who accept Jesus as the messiah can continue to practice their faith, a reference to Messianic Jews, popularly known as Jews for Jesus.

The Messianic movement, which emerged in its modern form in the 1970s, incorporates Jewish symbols and practices — including referring to Jesus by his Hebrew name, Yeshua — but is widely seen as a form of Christianity. All major Jewish denominations reject it, and Israel considers Messianic Jews to be converts to another faith.

"There's no such thing really as the Messianic movement," said Rabbi Tovia Singer, who leads an organization devoted to countering missionary activity aimed at Jews. "It's a dog whistle, it's a name that's used by evangelical Christian Protestants."

He said Simpson's willingness to speak openly about conversion reflects the growing influence of evangelical Christians in both Israel and the United States.

"They feel bulletproof to say these kinds of things and what their real agenda is," he said.

Rev. Malcolm Hedding, the former executive director of the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem, an umbrella group for Christian Zionists, said Christians only share their faith when asked, and denied they have any secret agenda.

"Evangelical support for Israel is not based on prophecies but on promises that God gave to Abraham 4,000 years ago," he said. "We cannot, and should not, let the arrival of a TV channel in Israel impact negatively on the well-being of a movement that for decades now has brought about a new day in Jewish Christian relationships."

At least one prominent evangelical supporter of Israel has criticized GOD TV for airing missionary content aimed at Jews, saying it encourages anti-Semitism.

"In recent decades, millions of Christians have felt the call to stand with the State of Israel and the Jewish people with no hidden agenda," said Laurie Cardoza-Moore, a Tennessee-based evangelical who hosts a program called "Focus on Israel" that previously aired on GOD TV.

"Any attempts to convert Jews or downgrade their religion will only [sow] undue hatred at a time when we should unite in the face of darkness," Cardoza-Moore said.

Daniel Hummel, the author of a book on evangelicals and Israel, says Christian Zionists have "more or less learned" that Messianic Judaism's presence in the movement is "politically unwise."

"The issue always continues to simmer, but the precedent was set [in the 1970s] and grew stronger that any Christian organization wishing to work in Israel or be at all close to the center of political action in the [Christian Zionist movement] would need to publicly disavow at minimum coercive evangelization."

Simpson says GOD TV has hired lawyers to resolve the issue and is determined to stay on the air.

“The last thing we want to do is to cause division over there,” he said. “We love Israel.”

05.18.20 – Mo - - -

Activists Yehuda Etzion & Arnon Segal petition to ascend to the Temple Mount Monday

05.18.20

Supreme Court to hear petition over Jewish access to Temple Mount

Two applicants seeking permission for Jews to ascend to flashpoint Jerusalem holy site that has been denied since the coronavirus lockdown started, claim Jordan's Muslim trust, which oversees the area, has already been allowed back

i24NEWS| Published: 05.18.20, 08:56

The Supreme Court was due to hear a petition Monday to allow Jews to access to the Temple Mount compound in Jerusalem, which has been temporarily prohibited during the coronavirus crisis.

The petitioners, Yehuda Etzion and Arnon Segal, are far-right activists who have been challenging the government to allow free access to the compound, which is holy to both Jews and Muslims.

They claim that Israel made an arrangement with the Kingdom of Jordan to keep both Muslims and Jews off the Temple Mount while the coronavirus pandemic was at its height.

The applicants' lawyer, far-right activist Itamar Ben-Gvir, maintained that Jordan's Waqf (Islamic trust), which has day-to-day control over the Temple Mount, was allowed back while Jews were still banned.

The petitioners argue that preventing Jews from ascending while Muslims are allowed up is unconstitutional. They further claimed that banning Segal, who is also a journalist, was a violation of the freedom of the press.

Even within Jerusalem, which has many contending traditions and religious affiliations, the Temple Mount is a highly sensitive location and has been the site of multiple clashes between Israeli security forces and Palestinian worshippers.

Jews revere the area as the site of both of the First and Second Jewish Temples, while for the last 1,300 years, Muslims have worshiped at the place where the Prophet Mohammad is traditionally believed to have ascended to heaven.

While Jews are permitted to ascend to the Temple Mount in heavily restricted numbers and only through one of the 12 gates, there are strict restrictions on prayer at Judaism's holiest site.

05.17.20 – Su - - -

Knesset approved 73 to 46; World leaders congratulated Netanyahu & Gantz

05.17.20

World leaders cheer formation of new government

Modi posted in Hebrew on his Twitter account that he congratulates Netanyahu on the establishment of his fifth government and wishes Gantz success, Putin and Pompeo also sent warm greetings

Itamar Eichner | Published: 05.17.20 , 23:16

Some world leaders on Sunday congratulated Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister and Vice Prime Minister Benny Gantz on the formation of the new Israeli government.

The Knesset on Sunday voted to approve the new government led by Netanyahu in a 73 to 46 vote.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi posted in Hebrew on his Twitter account saying he congratulates his friend Netanyahu on the establishment of his fifth government and wishes Gantz success. "I look forward to continuing our close cooperation with the new government and strengthening the strategic partnership between India and Israel," Modi wrote.

Russian President Vladimir Putin also congratulated the prime minister, "I hope that your new government will continue the policy towards the development of friendly ties and mutually beneficial cooperation between our countries. No doubt, it is in the interests of the peoples of Russia and Israel and is in line with the efforts to ensure peace, security, and stability," Putin said in a telegram.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who visited Israel briefly last week and met with both Netanyahu and Gantz posted on Twitter his congratulations, "We warmly welcome the announcement of the formation of a new Government of Israel. We are extremely fortunate to have such strong and experienced partners in Jerusalem, and we will work together to advance the security and prosperity of our peoples," Pompeo wrote.

Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurtz added his warm words congratulating Netanyahu and expressing his hope that bilateral relations between the countries will grow as "we continue our efforts to fight antisemitism and anti-Zionism in all its forms."

05.17.20 – Su - - -

Israel schools, defense & embassies face 30% budget reduction after crisis

05.17.20

Israel's new government has its hands full

Analysis: The first stable coalition in 18 months must now tackle the fallout from the lasting political turmoil as well as the global pandemic, which is extensive, multifaceted and challenging and affects education, defense, health and the economy

Ynet| Published: 05.17.20 , 21:41

Israel's 35th government was sworn in on Sunday, after the country had an interim government for more than 18 months.

The new ministers will have a myriad of issues to deal with, including the restoration of the state's international standing, the ongoing fight against the coronavirus, and the treatment of the state's weakened populations.

Blue & White MK Gabi Ashkenazi is going into a Foreign Ministry at a nadir. The ministry has been left bruised, torn, without a budget and with unmotivated staffers who have no idea what the future holds.

With a deficit of NIS 300 million, both the ministry and Israel's embassies around the world have remained with no budget; the lack of international flights has further exacerbated dire state of foreign diplomacy.

In less than 18 months, Ashkenazi needs to leave his mark and revitalize the dying ministry whose powers have either been butchered or simply taken away. Ashkenazi's first task as foreign minister should be to go straight to the Finance Ministry (now headed by predecessor Israel Katz of the Likud) and demand his budget back, in order to enable the ministry to return to full functionality.

Ashkenazi has another mission ahead of him: To cultivate relations with leaders around the globe while standing in the shadow of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is in fact Israel's true foreign minister.

The new foreign minister will have to deal with the crisis between the Israeli government and the U.S. Democratic Party, and prepare for the possibility that former vice president Joe Biden will win the U.S. presidential elections in November.

Ashkenazi will also have to deal with Netanyahu's desire to annex as many territories as possible in the West Bank - a move that will most likely bring Israel to a head-on confrontation with the international community, the Palestinians and the Arab world. The mission standing in front of Ashkenazi and Blue & White leader Benny Gantz will be to curb the annexation dreams of Netanyahu and his right-wing bloc.

Another challenge is to try to expand Israel's relations with Arab states. The emphasis is on the Persian Gulf, with which Netanyahu's government has had an underground love affair over the years.

Relations with Poland will also need special care, after former foreign minister Katz said not so long ago that, “Poles suckle anti-Semitism with their mothers’ milk.” The quote was attributed originally to former Likud prime minister Yitzhak Shamir. In addition, the International Criminal Court in The Hague might decide to investigate Israel for war crimes. Ashkenazi should prepare to thwart such a decision, or else cope with its diplomatic ramifications in the form of the arrest of Israeli officers and leaders abroad.

Ministry on life support

New Health Minister Yuli Edelstein is also going into a battered and impoverished ministry. The previous ministers, Yaakov Litzman and Netanyahu himself, left behind a ministry divided and roiling.

There are also allegations of tunnel vision and lack of transparency in decision-making, sidelining senior officials in positions of influence and hiding information.

Edelstein managed to skip over the first landmine by announcing that he would appoint a medical professional as ministry director-general, thus preventing a direct confrontation with senior health officials.

He will immediately have to deal with the crisis in the hospitals, which have suffered a significant decrease in finances due to the drop in hospitalizations and surgeries during the coronavirus crisis.

The issue of a shortage of hospital beds, in particular during the winter, is also expected to be the focus of the new minister's attention.

Edelstein will also need to prepare the health system for another eruption of coronavirus next winter, which may coincide with an increase in influenza cases. He will also have to deal with the global shortage of influenza vaccines and the preparation of hospitals to accommodate thousands of patients.

Another issue Edelstein will have to deal with is the doctors' collective wage agreement that expired in December 2019.

Negotiating a new agreement offers a significant opportunity to improve doctors' pay conditions, but could also be the key to solving interns' demands to significantly shorten their on-call hours.

This will be a true leadership test for Edelstein, who will surely have to deal with pressures from the Finance Ministry in solving these issues.

Fighting for money

For Blue & White leader Benny Gantz, the first issue he will have to face as defense minister will be the ministry's budget.

Gantz will also have to deal with the ambitious plan of current chief of staff Aviv Kochavi. The plan, dubbed Tnufa (momentum) is meant to focus on swift decision-making regarding state enemies, upgrading combat equipment and introducing various structural changes to the army.

This plan has been in limbo for the past 18 months due to Israel's ongoing political crisis and lack of a stable government.

The upper echelons of the IDF have agreed to shrink their budget requirement by 30%, but they still expect there to be a separate budget to deal with the Iranian threat.

Gantz will also deal with fact that in recent years, the military has cut back on entire divisions and squadrons, but has also been unbridled in investing its resources for the next war.

This means that regular IDF units will receive a larger budget while reservist units will be left behind, with fewer training regimes, obsolete equipment and missing equipment. Another urgent mission are the allegedly secret negotiations with Hamas to return two Israeli captives and the bodies of two fallen soldiers held by the organization. If Netanyahu and Gantz work together for a compromise on the issue, this is likely to happen in the coming weeks, solidifying Gantz's tenure as defense minister.

A hard lesson

The new education minister, Yoav Galant, is going into the ministry that has the second largest budget after defense, and has two million and 200,000 students in its care.

Galant will have to solve the crisis that is now on the minds of hundreds of thousands of parents, teachers and students: The school year during the coronavirus crisis will either be extended by nine days or the summer vacation will take place in a different format, if at all.

Another pressing issue is providing a long-term solution to reducing the educational gap between students following the coronavirus crisis, addressing the isolation and mental harm experienced by students, and repairing the bruised relationship between teachers and parents.

The debate and chaos surrounding distance learning have revealed the failure of the education system with regards to computers and infrastructure, disparities between authorities over providing student computers, and gaps in remote teaching practices during both regular times and crises for students and teachers alike.

One of the critical issues that the education system has been dealing with in recent decades, and will have to be managed by the new minister, is the lack of professional teachers and the quality of teacher training.

Due to a shortage of teachers, schools are giving up teaching certain subjects or continue to employ subpar teachers. Only comprehensive reform can lead to real change.

05.17.20 – Su - - -

Chinese ambassador missed break fast, found by housekeeper dead by cardiac arrest

05.17.20

Police: Chinese ambassador death due to cardiac arrest

Du Wei, 58, was found dead in his bed; He was appointed envoy in February, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic and was survived by his wife and son who are not in the country

Ynet| Published: 05.17.20 , 21:31

Du Wei, the Chinese ambassador to Israel who was found dead in his apartment in Herzliya, died due to cardiac arrest, the police confirmed Sunday.

Du was found in his bed by his housekeeper after the ambassador failed to attend breakfast.

Police forensics investigators arrived at the scene to begin their investigation and transfer the body for an autopsy at the National Center of Forensic Medicine in Tel Aviv.

Advertisement

Ambassador Du began his tenure in Israel in February in the midst of the coronavirus epidemic and remained in home isolation for two weeks in accordance with the Health Ministry's regulations. He is survived by a wife and son, both of whom are not in the country.

Du had posted a message of encouragement to Israelis shortly after taking on the post, which was published on the Chinese Embassy's official Facebook page. "The world is engulfed in a major challenge of pandemic and Israel is impacted," said the statement. According to Foreign Ministry's procedures when an ambassador dies at his post, the ministry's chief of protocol along with the relevant division head contact the embassy to offer assistance in coordination with local authorities, and in transporting the deceased remains back home.

Foreign Ministry Director-General Yuval Rotem spoke with the Deputy Chief of Mission, Dai Yuming, to express his condolences and offer any possible aid to the Chinese embassy.

On Friday the ambassador posted a message via the Chinese Embassy's website, rejecting claims made by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during a brief visit to Israel last week, of a Chinese government cover-up of the coronavirus spread.

The Chinese Embassy in Israel said Pompeo has been labeling Chinese products, investments, and people as security risks without producing any evidence to support his claims.

"We trust that our Jewish friends are not only able to defeat the coronavirus but also the 'political virus,' and choose the course of action that best serves its interests," said the statement.

Because of the coronavirus restrictions and the suspension of flights to China, it is unclear when the body will be returned for burial.

05.17.20 – Su - - -

Synagogues to open for permanent Attendees, separation of seats. don masks

05.17.20

Israel mulls reopening of houses of worship

Each house of worship will have permanent parishioners, with religious articles brought from home and a 'virus supervisor' to make sure public health directives are being observed

Itamar Eichner, Adir Yanko | Published: 05.17.20, 21:00

Security, health and interior government officials met on Sunday to prepare an outline for the reopening of synagogues and houses of worship.

Houses of worship throughout the country have been shuttered under order since March 26, with many communities closing down these institutions before the Health Ministry edict following pleas by senior rabbis to do so.

According to the outline which will be brought to the government for approval, houses of worship would allow only permanent parishioners to attend services while social distancing would be observed by a separation of seats within the building.

Attendees would also be required to don a protective face mask throughout the service, with prayer books and articles to be brought from home.

Each temple would have an appointed "coronavirus supervisor" who would oversee that public health directives are being adhered to.

Over the past weeks, as coronavirus restrictions continue to be eased, more protest have been heard throughout the country demanding to reopen the synagogues after schools and businesses were allowed to.

Synagogues have been marked by health officials as problematic infection sites throughout the epidemic after many in the ultra-Orthodox communities did not observe the guidelines for social distancing.

The Chief Rabbinate has been criticized for not calling for a closure of synagogues earlier during the epidemic.

Disagreements between Rabbinate officials, who urged the continuation of public prayer under health supervisions and senior rabbis, who called for the immediate closure of prayer houses, have led to a disorganized shuttering of these institutions.

A day prior to the Health Ministry order to shutter temples, official data pointed to these locations as problematic breeding grounds for further spread of coronavirus.

Health authorities and leaders in the Muslim communities have urged their faithful to refrain from crowded prayers in mosques during the holy month of Ramadan which is nearing its end later in the week.

05.17.20 – Su - - -

Israel ends 18 months of political paralysis with Netanyahu government

05.17.20

Israel gets new government, ending 18 months of political paralysis

Largest government in country's history is sworn in, year and a half after Knesset dissolved for of three consecutive elections since April 2019; Netanyahu says his coalition's immediate challenge is 'jobs, jobs, jobs'
Ynet| Updated: 05.17.20 , 19:03

After more than a year of political stagnation and three consecutive elections, Israel on Sunday got its first full government since November 2018 as the Knesset voted to approve the new coalition by a vote of 73 to 46.

The 35th government is the largest in Israel's history, with 36 ministers and 16 deputy ministers. It sees Benjamin Netanyahu still in the prime minister's seat for the next 18 months at least and his political partner Benny Gantz serving as defense minister until he is scheduled to take over as premier in October 2021.

After Knesset members approved the coalition, ministers walked up to the podium one by one to take their oath of office, vowing to carry out their duty as members of the government, fulfill the laws of the land and adhere to the decisions of the Knesset. Netanyahu said he opted for a coalition agreement with Gantz' Blue & White party in order to avoid a fourth election campaign in just over a year.

The 73 members of Knesset who now support the government would, according to Netanyahu, ensure a stable government that could lead the country during the coronavirus crisis and the challenges that the coronavirus pandemic has presented.

"There is a drop in the number of COVID-19 cases," Netanyahu told journalists, "but no one knows if there will be another spike or a second wave and no one can say what the virus will do."

"We saved thousands of lives, but we must not think the pandemic is over," the prime minister said as he called on the public to maintain vigilance.

"The new government's first challenge is jobs, jobs, jobs," he said.

Netanyahu said he has not closed the door on the possibility that Naftali Bennett's far-right Yamina party would join the coalition.

Earlier Sunday, the Knesset approved former tourism minister Yariv Levin of Likud for the position of Knesset speaker, a position vacated by Benny Gantz.

In his acceptance speech, Levin warned of growing intervention in legislation by the Supreme Court.

Levin, who was slated to become justice minister had Netanyahu succeeded in forming a right-wing government, has been outspoken in his criticism of the judiciary.

05.17.20 – Su - - -

Netanyahu and Gantz openly advance issues, while Joint List & Meretz heckle

05.17.20

'The people wanted unity,' says PM, presenting Israel's largest-ever government
After three elections in 12 months, Netanyahu and Gantz hail reconciliation as they
unveil new coalition in Knesset; prime minister cites urgency of coronavirus crisis and
desire to avoid even more costly fourth election
Moran Azulay, Associated Press | Updated: 05.17.20, 14:16

After three deadlocked and divisive elections, a year and a half of political paralysis and another three-day delay because of political infighting in his Likud party over coveted cabinet posts, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu finally oversaw the swearing-in of his new government on Sunday.

"The people wanted unity, and that is what it got," Netanyahu told the Knesset on Sunday, citing a desire to avoid a fourth election since April 2019 and the national battle against the coronavirus crisis.

Netanyahu and rival-turned-partner Benny Gantz of Blue & White announced last month they would be putting their differences aside to join forces to steer the country through the coronavirus crisis and its severe economic fallout.

Over the weekend, the two announced their appointments for the new government - the most bloated in Israeli history with an expected 36 ministers and 16 deputies.

"This is an important day for the State of Israel," Netanyahu said Sunday. "The new government was established according to the will of most citizens and will serve all citizens."

"We have chosen, with great responsibility, to establish an emergency government of national unity," he said.

"If we had gone into a fourth election - the additional cost would have amounted to NIS 2 billion. The additional cost of a unity government [was roughly] NIS 85 million a year, infinitely lower than the cost of additional elections," he said.

"That would have been a real waste. It would have forced us to defer the fallout of the coronavirus to an undetermined date."

Netanyahu's speech was interrupted several times by Knesset members from the Joint List and Meretz, who shouted: "Bribery, fraud and breach of trust," referring to the indictments against the prime minister, and "You are a criminal defendant."

Netanyahu responded: "I can give you advice from my years of experience - it doesn't work. You get respect if you show respect."

Turning to the coronavirus outbreak, Netanyahu hailed the national response to the crisis that led to a relatively low death toll as compared to other Western countries.

"The situation in Israel is different because of the steps taken in time, closing the skies, self-isolation and, of course, the citizens who adhered to the Health Ministry guidelines and the wonderful medical staff," he said.

"But the battle is not yet over," he said. "The danger will be removed only when a vaccine has been found and in the meantime the virus is still here. There is a possibility that a second wave of the virus will hit the world and Israel, as happened with the Spanish flu epidemic 100 years ago."

Netanyahu said that the new government would continue to thwart and remove security threats to Israel, and also address the issue of sovereignty over the West Bank settlements and Jordan Valley.

"We will fight the International Criminal Court's attempt at accusing IDF soldiers of war crimes and the State of Israel for the horrendous crime of kindergarten construction. What hypocrisy, what twisting of the truth. These areas of the country are birthplaces of the Jewish nation. It's time to apply Israeli law over them.

"This step will not distance peace but bring it closer. The truth, and everyone knows it, is that hundreds of thousands of settlers in Judea and Samaria would always stay where they are under any agreement. The issue of sovereignty is on the agenda solely because I personally acted to advance it openly and honestly for the past three years."

Speaking after Netanyahu, Gantz also had to stop his speech several times due to heckling from his erstwhile colleagues in Blue & White, now functioning as the Yesh Atid party.

"We have been through three election campaigns in the past year and a half," he said.

"The people have spoken and left we the leaders from both sides of the house to opt for unity or some form of civil war. The people told us 'Stop fighting among yourselves and start working for us.' I, Prime Minister Netanyahu and 71 other public servants decided to assume national responsibility," he said.

"This is an equal government, a government of balance and brakes. I and my colleagues chose unity in order to protect the citizens of Israel not only from the challenges facing outside our borders but also from the hatred that erodes within and harms the internal resilience that is vital to our security.

"We chose unity in a period when public officials are being threatened and lines are being crossed against public figures on the left and right."

Once Gantz had finished, the podium was given over to Opposition Leader-designate MK Yair Lapid, the head of Yesh Atid and former ally of the Blue & White leader.

Lapid lost no time in attacking the new coalition and its bloated size.

"This building has finally lost the confidence of the citizens of Israel," he said.

"Politics takes citizens' money and gives us nothing in return. There is connection between politics and people's real lives.

In real life, if your expenses outstrip your income, you get a call from the bank. This is what is happening to dozens of small businesses and laid off workers who are eating through their savings.

"In this building, in politics, the coronavirus is an excuse to hold a corrupt party at the expense of the taxpayers.

You are today establishing the biggest government in history, are you are calling it an emergency government? At present, there are less than 50 people on ventilators because of the coronavirus.

There are more ministers than intubated coronavirus patients. It's not just the profligacy, it's also the utter disregard for the distress of Israelis. Setting up unnecessary ministries at their expense, a celebration costing hundreds of millions.

"Of course nobody thinks of selling the unnecessary [prime minister's] plane for NIS 780 million. In people's real life, someone with three indictments cannot be the deputy

principal of a school, cannot be a minister's driver," he said. "No one would put a unit of soldiers in the hands of a person facing charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust."

The controversial power-sharing deal calls for Netanyahu to serve as prime minister for the government's first 18 months before being replaced by Gantz for the next 18 months. Their blocs will also have a similar number of ministers and virtual veto power over the other's major decisions.

Critics have already accused the government of being out of touch by creating so many cabinet posts at a time when unemployment has soared to more than 25% as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

But because Netanyahu's bloc includes several smaller parties, he still only has a limited number of cabinet ministries to hand out to the Likud rank and file, and he faced a mini-insurgency from angry senior members ahead of the planned swearing-in ceremony on Thursday. Unable to meet a deadline, Netanyahu asked for a delay to solve his internal party crisis.

Among the political casualties was Likud MK and former Jerusalem mayor Nir Barkat, who was not appointed as minister despite his popularity among the party's voters.

"Barkat deserves a senior role in both the Likud and the government," Netanyahu said Sunday. "Unfortunately it did not work out before the government was sworn in."

The prime minister said he would endeavour to find a senior role for the former mayor in the future.

The deal has already led to the dissolution of Gantz's Blue & White alliance after - to the fury of many of his party's voters - he reneged on his central campaign promise not to serve under Netanyahu, who has been indicted on corruption charges and goes on trial later this month. Their much-scrutinized coalition deal could only come about after the High Court ruled it had no legal grounds to block it.

Despite the criticism, Gantz argued that teaming with Netanyahu offered the country its only way out of the prolonged stalemate and prevented Israel from being dragged once again to another costly election that would have been its fourth in just over a year. Gantz will start out as defense minister, with party colleague and fellow retired military chief Gabi Ashkenazi serving as foreign minister. Netanyahu's top deputy in Likud, outgoing Foreign Minister Israel Katz, will become finance minister.

Yariv Levin, perhaps Netanyahu's closest ally, will become the new Knesset speaker, a position vacated by Gantz as he becomes defense minister. The coalition will also include ultra-Orthodox parties United Torah Judaism and Shas and some other individual defectors to add up to 73 out of the 120 members.

The main point of contention for critics has been the newly created position of "alternate prime minister," a post that could allow Netanyahu to remain in office even after the swap and throughout his corruption trial and a potential appeals process. There are also deep suspicions about whether Netanyahu will keep his part of the bargain and ultimately cede the premiership to Gantz.

Still, the new position is supposed to enjoy all the trappings of the prime minister, including an official residence and, key for Netanyahu, an exemption from a law that requires public officials who are not prime minister to resign if charged with a crime.

Netanyahu has been indicted on charges of fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes in a series of scandals involving allegedly trading favors with wealthy media moguls. He denies any wrongdoing and blames the charges on a media-orchestrated plot to oust him. Since his indictment last fall, he has repeatedly lashed out at the country's legal system as well, with his political allies taking special aim at the high court and accusing it of overreach and political interference.

His **legal woes and fitness to serve were central issues** in the recent election **campaigns**, in particular for Gantz's Blue & White party.
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05.16.20 – Sa - - -

Vehicles, not marches, to mark Iran's annual anti-Israel rally on Friday

05.16.20

Vehicles, not marches, to mark Iran's annual anti-Israel rally

President Hassan Rouhani says this year's **Quds Day**, which typically sees thousands taking to the streets to burn Israeli flags and **chant anti-Israel slogans**, will involve **Iranians driving in cars** due to the coronavirus outbreak

Reuters| Published: **05.16.20** , 18:49

Rallies next week in Tehran to mark the annual **Quds Day** against Israel **will involve** **Iranians driving in vehicles not marching through the streets**, to avoid spreading the coronavirus, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said on state television on Saturday.

The elite **Revolutionary Guards** would be **in charge of organizing the rallies**, Rouhani said, adding that those joining in **could still chant slogans from their vehicles** and **wave flags**.

Rallies to mark Quds Day, which uses the **Arabic name for Jerusalem**, are held in towns and cities across the country and aim **to show of support for the Palestinians**. Typically those marching chant "Death to Israel" and burn the Israeli flag.

Rouhani said Quds Day, held **each year on the last Friday of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan** which falls on May 22, would go ahead as normal in 218 other towns and cities, where the coronavirus outbreak has been less severe than the capital.

"The coronavirus danger is still there, but our situation is better than before," he said.

""We have crossed the main peak."

As of Saturday, Iran's death toll from the pandemic stood at 6,937 with 118,392 diagnosed cases, the health ministry said.

The ministry spokesman said the death toll in the past 24 hours was 35, the lowest in the past 70 days, while the number of new cases was 1,757.

Shia Muslim shrines dotted around the country are due to reopen for six hours a day after Ramadan, which is based on the lunar calendar and is expected to end around May 24 this year.

Shrines would open for three hours in the morning and three hours in the afternoon, Rouhani said, although he said some areas of the shrines, such as narrow corridors, would stay shut.

The president said restaurants would also reopen after Ramadan and sports activities would resume without spectators. Universities, but not medical schools, would reopen on June 6, Rouhani added.

05.16.20 – Sa - - -

Tel Aviv mayor bracing for exodus over high costs and disappearance of tourists

05.16.20

Tel Aviv mayor bracing for exodus over costs and coronavirus

In-depth: As the virus leaves many without a stable source of income, Ron Huldai is expecting many to leave due to notoriously high living costs, while a local councilor says the municipality needs to offer better services

Itay Katz | Published: 05.16.20, 18:33

Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai is expecting residents to leave the city en masse in the wake of the coronavirus crisis that has made the already high cost of living in the city prohibitive.

Huldai expressed concern for the younger population, many of whom work as waiters and baristas and were hard hit by the crisis and who will be unable to keep renting in the city due to the widespread wave of layoffs in their sector.

In addition to the high rent and living expenses in the city, there is also the cost of early childhood education, which in Tel Aviv can reach as high as NIS 5,000 (\$1,400) per month.

Between the 1960s and the 1980s, Tel Aviv's population decreased dramatically. But since the start of the 90s, the trend has reversed with Tel Aviv becoming an immensely popular location. This caused the cost of living in the city to reach new peaks and put it at the top of the most expensive cities in the world.

“The mayor assumes many families with children will leave the city as he believes many will not be able to afford to rent,” says the head of the municipality's education department, Shirley Rimon-Bracha.

“But we are still not seeing this data in action, as the schools are packed and no preschools remain empty.”

In an effort to alleviate the cost of living for families, city councilor Tzipi Brand, who oversees Tel Aviv's department for early childhood, tried to advance the creation of dozens of day care centers but the move was put on indefinite hold due to the spread of the virus.

Brand also proposed the temporary use of public spaces such as community centers for preschoolers and day care centers in order to make it easier and more viable for families to stay in the city.

“The city has a great challenge to deal with now,” says Brand.

“With the near total disappearance of the city's tourists as a source of income, and changes to people's consumption habits, for it to survive the city needs to invest in young families so they will be able to continue to live here, and to offer them municipal services not necessarily required by the state,” she says.

Deputy Mayor Meital Lehavi is less pessimistic.

“Anyone who understands urbanism knows that a city has both young and old people,” she says. “But the center of the city has people in their 50s renting apartments and it is indeed is very expensive.”

Lehavi is also skeptical of Huldai's dire assessment.

“Ron is expecting offices to shut down and for the young to leave the the city; he is a little apocalyptic,” she says.

Lehavi acknowledges, however, that things will become harder still for local residents, as work increases on the construction of the new light rail in the central arteries of Arlozorov, Ben-Yehuda and Allenby streets.

She says however that if the municipality does not offer support to private preschools, then the city will experience a collapse.

05.18.20 – Mo - - -

US cost-cutting may withdraw multinational troops & Observers in Sinai

05.18.20

Report: U.S. lawmakers warn against pulling troops out of Sinai

In bipartisan letter to Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mark Esper, lawmakers urge the administration to refrain from risking the Israeli Egyptian peace that they call an 'anchor of stability' in region

i24NEWS| Updated: 05.18.20 , 11:09

Twelve lawmakers from key congressional panels warned against pulling U.S. troops out of an international peacekeeping force on the Sinai Peninsula in an open letter dated May 13, Jewish Telegraphic Agency reported Sunday.

The 12 lawmakers, including chairs and ranking members in foreign affairs and armed services, came out with a bipartisan message of support to the force established in 1981 to supervise the implementation of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty of 1979.

They describe the peace treaty as an "anchor of stability" in a volatile region, preventing more fighting between former rivals for decades and sparing generations of soldiers from bloodshed.

The letter to State Secretary Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mark Esper argue that the Multinational Force and Observers in Sinai, has been "vital to the peace treaty's durability."

It said the historic agreement and its legitimacy in the eyes of both Cairo and Jerusalem were largely a product of American leadership in the mission - a position that they urge the U.S. to maintain.

The letter followed earlier reports by the Wall Street Journal that the U.S. Defense Department was considering the withdrawal of forces out of Sinai as part of a cost-cutting effort.

The move was said to be vehemently opposed by the State Department as well as Israel, which were concerned the move could pave the way to the mission's unraveling at a time of increased terrorist activity in the area.

Egypt has long been fighting an insurgency in Sinai, which greatly escalated in 2014 as the secessionist insurgents pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, prompting Cairo to start a massive operation in the restive peninsula in 2018.