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Two Gaza rockets firing at Ashkelon; IDF struck Hamas rocket assembly site
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MK's at war expired budget, dissolving Knesset; now vote in 90 days, March 23

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Retiring US Senator budgets institutional peacebuilding fund for Israel & Palestine

12.26.20

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12.26.20

2 Palestinians hurt in retaliatory IDF strikes in Gaza

Hamas says the attacks 'will not break the will of the Palestinian people'; military struck rocket manufacturing facility and training and military posts belonging to Hamas after 2 rockets had been fired at Ashkelon

Ynet, Associated Press| Published: 12.26.20 , 09:37

Two Palestinians in the Gaza Strip were lightly wounded in IDF strikes carried out in response to the firing of two rockets at the southern city of Ashkelon late Friday.

The IDF said Israeli aircraft struck several sites in the Strip early Saturday, including rocket manufacturing facility and training and military posts belonging to Hamas, a terror group that controls the coastal enclave.

"IDF attacks will not break the will of the Palestinian people, but will strengthen their willfulness to hold on to their rights," said a spokesperson for Hamas.

The rockets fired on Friday were aimed at the coastal city, but air defenses intercepted them, the military said. No Palestinian group in Gaza has claimed responsibility for the rocket fire, which broke months of cross-border calm.

Volleys of missiles from **the Iron Dome** defense system illuminated the sky in northern Gaza Strip as they exploded trying to hit the incoming rockets.

Rocket attacks and Israeli retaliatory artillery and aerial strikes are frequent, but they have largely been subdued in recent months due to the raging coronavirus outbreak in both territories.

Hamas which has **ruled Gaza since 2007** and fought three wars with Israel and countless rounds of smaller skirmishes, maintains an unofficial cease-fire with Israel.

12.25.20

Election clash has many reforms & projects ignored or shelved from lack of budget

12.25.20

Elections leave Israel's key initiatives in deep freeze

Among the **plans** stuck or shelved due to the Knesset's dissolution are **legalization of marijuana**, **reducing MKs' salaries**, fixing the **Haredi draft** and **massive housing and transportation projects** to improve the lives of Israelis

Calcalist| Published: **12.25.20** , 19:21

Even before the **political deadlock** and the coronavirus crisis, **many projects, reforms, initiatives and promises** - some made years ago by previous governments - have gone unfulfilled and even **ignored**.

While the government formed in May worked on **several initiatives**, the Knesset's dissolution means that any projects that were **in the works** or otherwise seen some advancement are **now halted indefinitely**.

Among the initiatives that are not expected to come to pass any time soon is the bill submitted by Finance Minister Israel Katz to **reduce the salaries of the president, prime minister, ministers, Knesset members and judges**.

And while the government had already approved the bill that would save the state NIS 70 million by the end of 2021, an appeal filed by departing Likud minister Ze'ev Elkin means the legislation has been frozen.

Another casualty is the attempts to correct the law that exempts ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students from being enlisted in the IDF.

Under a decision by the High Court, the law was to be annulled on February 1, 2021 if the state failed to pass a new law by that time. The dissolution of the Knesset means the deadline is no longer viable and therefore the law will remain as is for the foreseeable future.

Yet another initiative that will not see the light of day anytime soon is the initiative to raise the retirement age for women. Discussions on the issue have been taking place in the Knesset in recent years, but have not yet turned into legislation.

The dissolution of the Knesset also means that a cannabis legalization bill promoted by Justice Minister Avi Nissenkorn will not have its first reading in the Knesset and is thus tabled for the time being.

The reform to expand the authority of school principals and the budgets available to them, proposed by Education Minister Yoav Galant, has also been shelved. The National Committee for Planning and Building Preferred Housing Compounds, which seeks to expedite the construction of affordable homes, is currently having difficulty working on future plans because it has been operating under a temporary order that expired in June. Now the renewal of the order has been delayed indefinitely. The Reduced-Price Housing program, which was initiated by Housing Minister Yaakov Litzman, is also currently frozen due to lack of budget.

The metro - the largest transportation project in the country's history to connect more than 20 local authorities in central Israel at a cost of about NIS 150 billion - has been shelved by Transportation Minister Miri Regev until further notice. Additionally, Regev's promise to help IDF soldiers stationed in the Negev by building a high-speed train line to the Lakiya area is also stuck until further notice. The promise of Environmental Protection Minister Gila Gamliel to establish a committee to evacuate Tel Aviv's central bus station due to pollution and noise nuisances is currently also frozen.

The plan to build a new airport in Nevatim in the south or Ramat David in the north is also stuck and awaits the next government. The committee working to evacuate factories from Haifa Port - to avoid a potential disaster similar to the Beirut blast - cannot complete its work in the absence of legislation and budget. Changes in the cooking gas market, which could save up to NIS 4,000 per household a year, are also currently frozen as are telecom reforms that would eliminate the need for internet users to pay both an infrastructure provider and a service provider.

A reform of the Israel Post, which sought to reinvigorate the notoriously unreliable organization and provide better service to consumers, is also stuck along with a second reform for television.

12.24.20

Tel Aviv the past few days vaccinated 2,500, no doses without an appointment

12.24.20

Scuffles break out as Israelis clamor for vaccine in Tel Aviv

Other facilities around Israel also report long and crowded lines, with those with appointment unable to get vaccinated due to scores arriving without booking slot ahead of time, believing they will be allowed inoculation anyway

Sivan Hilaie, Adir Yanko | Published: 12.24.20, 13:12

Scuffles broke out between security officers and members of the public at a Clalit vaccine center in northern Tel Aviv on Thursday, when dozens of people arrived without booking an appointment to receive the shot, believing they would be admitted in any event.

Other facilities around Israel also reported long lines, with some people who have made an appointment unable to receive the vaccine. Clalit is the largest of Israel's four health maintenance organizations that are currently the only bodies administering the vaccine in the country.

Daniel Ernest, who arrived at the Clalit facility in Tel Aviv after making an appointment, decided to go home after seeing the crowds.

"I arrived here because I had an appointment and they told me the exact hour to arrive. But I understand that there are people here who think they can get a shot without making an appointment," he said.

"I also saw people who brought their partner or a friend to the center being told they can also get the vaccine. So people realized they can come without an appointment and it is a total mess. I decided to go home since I will not wait in such a crowd."

Another person who waited at the Clalit center claimed he had been told to arrive without an appointment.

"I did not book an appointment, they told me I could come without one. When I got here, they told me you do have to book an appointment, and they would book it for you in a week's time. I am waiting here because I think I will be able to get the shot, at least as far as they said. I have been here for an hour and nothing is moving."

Calm prevailed however at a nearby Maccabi HMO vaccination center, where there were orderly lines and those who did not have an appointment were taken aside to make one for the next available day.

Dudu Shashoa, who oversees Maccabi facilities in northern Tel Aviv, said that "we only let in people with an appointment, which could be booked through the call center or the phone app."

"People here do not have to wait for more than two or three minutes. In the past few days, we have vaccinated some 2,500 people here."

Shashoa urged anyone planning to turn up without an appointment to not do so as there would not be enough vaccine doses for them to be inoculated.

12.24.20

Germany bars Iran rocket sales for destabilizing Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq

12.24.20

Israel open to German efforts to expand Iran nuclear deal

Rework, dubbed 'nuclear agreement plus' by Germany's FM Maas, will bar Tehran's development of nuclear weapons as well as place restrictions on its ballistic rocket program and interference in countries around the region

AFP| Published: 12.24.20 , 09:52

Israel welcomes a German push to expand the Iran nuclear deal into a broader security agreement once U.S. President-elect Joe Biden moves into the White House next month, its ambassador to Berlin told AFP.

Jeremy Issacharoff, the nation's envoy in Germany since 2017, said a recent call by German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas to reassess the 2015 nuclear accord with a new U.S. administration was a "step in the right direction".

The 2015 nuclear deal -- known formally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA -- gave Iran relief from sanctions in return for curbs on its nuclear program. Maas told Der Spiegel magazine this month that the existing agreement, under massive pressure after repeated Iranian violations and outgoing-U.S. President Donald Trump's unilateral withdrawal in 2018, needed an overhaul.

The "nuclear agreement plus" envisaged by Maas would bar the development of nuclear weapons as well as place restrictions on Tehran's ballistic rocket program and interference in countries around the region.

Biden has signaled that Washington could rejoin the deal as a starting point for follow-on negotiations if Iran returned to compliance.

At least 150 Democratic members of Congress said in a letter Wednesday to Biden that they will support his efforts to rejoin the nuclear deal.

But Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has rejected talk of reopening the accord struck five years ago after marathon talks involving the United States, Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia.

'Triangular' partnership

Issacharoff said the so-called 5+1 partners needed to take Iran's "destabilizing involvement" in countries including Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq into account in any further negotiations with Tehran.

"I think people need to realize that you can't just turn the clock back to 2015," he said.

"There's been a production of missiles and testing of missiles and these issues need to be addressed as well as the wholesale violations that Iran has carried out against the whole JCPOA agreement."

Issacharoff said he welcomed more active involvement of Germany in Middle East diplomacy and the now robust "strategic partnership" that had developed in the 70 years since the Holocaust.

Anticipating a vast improvement in "tone" between Germany and the U.S. with Biden at the helm, he said Israel would like to see more of "a triangular type of strategic partnership" with the two countries on Middle East security issues "which I think would be very good for all sides".

The most important partnership

He said it was Germany's firm commitment to atone for Nazi atrocities that had allowed relations with Israel to flourish since the countries officially established diplomatic relations in 1965.

Issacharoff highlighted "moving" visits by German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier to both the Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and Auschwitz this year and joint military exercises in August between Israeli and German fighter pilots.

"From defense issues to culture, people-to-people engagements, economy, cyber, intelligence -- I can only see this as a partnership which is evolving and becoming one of, I'd say probably the most important partnership for Israel clearly in Europe but even in global terms."

Issacharoff said that as ties between Israel and four Arab nations -- Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan -- normalize in deals brokered by Donald Trump's administration, Germany had played a constructive role as well.

Noting that **Maas had hosted the first meeting between his Israeli and Emirati counterparts in October**, Issacharoff called it "a very important step for Germany and a very important sign of its commitment to the process."

He credited Maas and in particular Chancellor Angela **Merkel**, who **plans to retire** from politics next year after 16 years in power, with fostering deep and trusting relations with Israel despite their painful shared history.

"It's important to recognize her incredible contribution to the strength of the relationship," he said, hoping the commitment would "persist in German foreign policy".

"I am very encouraged and very inspired by how far two countries can go after such a difficult period of time and become so close."

12.23.20

MK's at war expired budget, dissolving Knesset; now vote in 90 days, March 23

12.23.20

Israel embarks on fourth election in two years as budget row topples Knesset Parliament dissolves as deadline to approve budget expires with coalition failing to legislate extension; Netanyahu to remain as PM until vote expected to take place on March 23; Likud set to remain biggest party despite strong challenge from its ex-MK Gideon Sa'ar

Ynet| Published: **12.23.20** , 00:06

Israel headed into its fourth election campaign in two years at the stroke of midnight Tuesday, as the **deadline for** passing a state **budget expired** and the **Knesset automatically dissolved** by law.

Elections are expected to take place on **March 23**, 2021 - exactly **90 days after** the **Knesset dissolved** as required by law.

The inability of **warring coalition** partners Likud and Blue & White to pass a budget had been expected after a **bill to extend the deadline** to do so until December 31 was

scuppered Monday night by rebel lawmakers from both parties and **failed with 47 votes in favor to 49 against.**

This left the government with less than 24 hours to reach an agreement on the legislation, get their respective MKs in line behind it and hold the three votes necessary to pass it. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Likud and Defense Minister Benny Gantz, the head of the Blue & White party, blamed one another for the collapse of the coalition.

"This is an erroneous decision on Blue & White's behalf, but if they force these elections on us, I promise you we will win. With your help, the people of Israel, Likud will bring a huge win," Netanyahu said Tuesday night as the clock counted down to midnight, hailing his success in securing millions of COVID-19 vaccines for Israel, recent normalization deals with Arab countries and a strong economy.

"A criminal defendant with three indictments is dragging the country to a fourth round of elections," Blue and White said Tuesday night, referring to Netanyahu's ongoing trial for corruption. "If there weren't a trial, there would be a budget and there wouldn't be elections."

The two formed their coalition last May after battling to a stalemate in three consecutive elections.

They said they were putting aside their personal rivalry to form an "emergency" government focused on guiding the country through the health and economic crises caused by the pandemic.

Legislating a biennial state budget for 2020 and 2021 was part of the coalition agreement signed by Likud and Blue & White, but has been a contentious issue for months.

Power struggle

Under the deal, Gantz assumed the new role of alternate prime minister and was assured he would trade places with Netanyahu next November in a rotation agreement halfway through their term.

Even as that power-sharing pact was being inked, many analysts argued that Netanyahu, on trial for alleged corruption which he denies, would not relinquish his powerful post.

Likud had demanded to pass the 2020 and 2021 budgets separately while Blue & White insisted Netanyahu stick to the deal reached after the March 2020 elections.

While the immediate cause of the collapse was the failure to pass a budget, it really reflected the failure of a partnership plagued by mutual hostility and mistrust from the outset.

For seven months, **Gantz has suffered** a number of **humiliations** and been **kept out of the loop on key decisions**, such as a series of U.S.-brokered diplomatic agreements with Arab countries.

Netanyahu accused Blue & White of acting as an **"opposition within the government."**

At the heart of this dysfunctional relationship is Netanyahu's corruption trial.

Gantz has accused Netanyahu of undermining their power-sharing deal in hopes of remaining in office throughout his trial, which is to kick into high gear in February when witnesses begin to take the stand.

He and other critics believe Netanyahu ultimately hopes to form a new government capable of appointing loyalists who could grant him immunity or dismiss the charges against him.

After Monday's failed vote, the furious coalition chairman, Likud MK Miki Zohar, slammed several party lawmakers for their decision to oppose the bill to extend the budget deadline. Several Blue & White MKs also voted nay, with some lawmakers resorting to subterfuge to avoid their respective party's officials.

Israel had this year managed its finances on the basis of a pro-rated version of the 2019 budget, and with just hours to go before the Knesset dissolved, the government approved an emergency addition of NIS 70 billion (\$21 billion) to the coffers in order to prevent major cuts to crucial state services.

The fiscal **deadlock** has **plunged Israel into** more **economic uncertainty** at the end of a year when a coronavirus-induced slump is expected to shrink gross domestic product by 4.5% with the **jobless rate** standing at **12.1%**.

Analysts had seen **Netanyahu pushing for an election in May or June** next year, after the coronavirus crisis was expected to ease and the economy to begin to recover.

Shifting fortunes

A March vote will be riskier for Israel's longest serving leader, who has been facing a wave of street protests against his alleged corruption and his handling of the pandemic. Though **polls point to Netanyahu's party emerging as the largest** parliamentary faction after the next elections, **surveys also predict** a strong showing for his erstwhile Likud **rival Gideon Sa'ar**, who quit the Knesset earlier this month to establish his own New Hope party and is expected to peel off votes from his former political home.

Several MKs have already announced their intention to join Sa'ar - who unsuccessfully tried to unseat Netanyahu as Likud leader in December 2019 - in the next elections.

Meanwhile, **Gantz's political fortunes appear to have plummeted.**

Blue & White fractured in April when he decided to strike a deal with Netanyahu and recent polls suggest the party would win only a handful of seats if elections were held soon.

Gantz has always maintained he joined a Netanyahu-led government to spare the country an election while the pandemic was ramping up, not because he trusted the premier.

"Blue and White **entered the government**, while paying a heavy political price, **to serve the best interests of the country**," Gantz said on Monday.

"I wasn't afraid to do the right thing several months ago, and I'm not afraid to do the right thing now," declaring his camp would head to a vote with its "head held high."

Reuters, AFP and AP contributed to this report

12.22.20

Retiring US Senator budgets institutional peacebuilding fund for Israel & Palestine

12.22.20

U.S. earmarks \$250 million for Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding

Senate passes Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act as part of coronavirus relief bill; will fund projects aimed at reversing 'growing polarization' in region; umbrella group of Mideast NGOs hails 'opportunity' for new strategies
Ynet| Published: 12.22.20 , 13:57

The U.S. Senate on Monday passed bipartisan legislation to provide hundreds of millions of dollars in funding for peacebuilding measures between Israel and the Palestinians.

The Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act, named for the Democratic representative who spearheaded the legislation, secures \$250 million over a five-year period and was included in the coronavirus relief bill passed in the Senate.

The funds will be used "to expand peace and reconciliation programs in the region, as well supporting projects to bolster the Palestinian economy," said the Alliance for Middle East Peace, an umbrella group of Israeli and Palestinian NGOs that has pushed for the law.

The new law, which now awaits the signature of U.S. President Donald Trump, was advanced by Democrats Lowey and Sen. Chris Coons along with Republicans Rep. Jeff Fortenberry and Sen. Lindsey Graham.

The bill comes after a decade of work by the Alliance for Middle East Peace to create such a fund, and places a priority on peacebuilding and reconciliation to reverse what it says is "growing polarization and dehumanization in the region."

The bill passed the House of Representatives over the summer before being sent to the Senate.

The legislation has also won support in the UK, whose government will reportedly look into joining the project after U.S. President-elect Joe Biden is sworn in on January 20. Lowey, the 82-year-old retiring House Appropriations Chairwoman and the lead Democrat, on the bill said: "It's my fervent wish that before I retire, I will have helped cement congressional support for your work through the passage of the Middle East Partnership for Peace Act. Together, we have come so far to advance this legislation through the House of Representatives with broad bipartisan support."

ALLMEP Executive Director John Lyndon said: "We thank Chairwoman Lowey, Congressman Fortenberry, Senator Coons, and Senator Graham for their dedication to ensuring that this vision—which ALLMEP has championed for over ten years—has now been brought to life.

"With Israelis and Palestinians more polarized than ever, this Fund can radically scale programs designed to upend that reality, creating the relationships, movements and leaders that any just and equitable peace depends upon.

"We are also excited about the opportunity this legislation opens for a genuinely multilateral strategy, allowing the U.S. to lead on the creation of a new, inclusive and institutionalized approach to peacebuilding alongside its global allies."