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04.07.21

Gaza virus rages as 100,000 doses received, but only 25,000 inoculated

04.07.21

Coronavirus rages in Gaza, with record tally of new daily cases

Health Ministry in the Hamas-controlled Gaza believes that due to limited testing, the number of daily COVID cases in Gaza is four times higher than the official figure; as a result, Hamas this week imposed a host of tough restrictions

Elior Levy | Published: 04.07.21 , 22:54

As coronavirus appears to be in decline in Israel, in the Gaza Strip the pandemic has seen a dramatic surge, with a record number of new daily cases diagnosed in the Palestinian enclave on Tuesday.

Gaza's Health Ministry reported on Wednesday that 1,916 new coronavirus cases have been diagnosed a day earlier out of only 5,000 tests conducted. This is the highest number of new daily cases since the start of the outbreak in the Strip.

Due to limited testing, Gaza's health authorities believe the actual number of daily cases is four times higher than the official figure.

In addition, about 300 patients are hospitalized in intensive care units across the Strip. Medical staff has said if the situation doesn't improve, hospitals would be forced to stop accepting young patients due to overcrowding.

Due to surge in infections, the Hamas terror group that rules Gaza, has decided to impose several new restrictions, including the shuttering of the education system, as well as increased enforcement on the streets.

These measures are a continuation of the restrictions imposed last week, including the closure of venues, a ban on gatherings, as well as a night curfew that starts at 9pm every evening.

At the same time, Hamas has launched an aggressive awareness campaign about the consequences of the pandemic and risks of catching COVID.

The campaign includes, among other things, informational videos showing coronavirus patients in hospitals, patients being resuscitated and images from the funerals of 642 people who died from the pathogen in the Strip.

A truck loaded with Russian-made Sputnik V doses from the UAE arrives in the Gaza Strip via the Rafah crossing with Egypt, on February 21, 2021. Around 20,000 coronavirus vaccine doses from the UAE arrived in Gaza today, a delivery reportedly orchestrated by a rival of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas three months before scheduled Palestinian elections.

The vaccine-needy enclave has thus far received around 100,000 doses from Russia, the United Arab Emirates, UN's COVAX program as well as Israel.

Despite this, **only around 25,000 out of Gaza's two million** citizens **have been inoculated**. Meanwhile, Israel is preparing to inoculate 7,000 Palestinian merchants from the Gaza Strip, who regularly pass through Israel and the West Bank. Palestinian Hamas policemen patrol on empty streets amid the ongoing coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic in Gaza

According to the outline, which has not yet been approved, **Qatar will** be the entity that will **fund the purchase of 14,000 vaccine doses** - two per merchant - from pharma giant Pfizer.

04.07.21

Biden aides consult Congress on legal obstacles to restore funding to PA

04.07.21

U.S. to restore more than \$200 million in aid to Palestinians

Based on notice emailed by the administration to congressional offices, **Biden's aid** package calls for **\$150 million through** refugee agency **UNWRA**, \$75 million in U.S. **economic support** and \$10 million in **development** funding

Reuters| Published: **04.07.21** , 19:47

The Biden administration plans to provide at least **\$235 million in U.S. aid** to the **Palestinians**, restoring a large part of the assistance that was cut off by then-President Donald Trump, people familiar with the matter said.

The package, including humanitarian, economic and security aid, is expected to be announced by the State Department later on Wednesday as part of **an effort to repair U.S. ties with the Palestinians** that all but collapsed during Trump's tenure.

It will mark Democratic President Joe **Biden's** most significant move since taking office on Jan. 20 to make good on his **promise to roll back** some components of his Republican predecessor's **approach** that Palestinians denounced as heavily biased **in favor of Israel**.
Advertisement

The plan calls for \$150 million through the United Nations relief agency UNWRA, \$75 million in U.S. economic support and \$10 million in development funding, according to a **notice** emailed by the administration **to congressional offices**.

The new administration has previously pledged to resume hundreds of millions of dollars in economic and humanitarian assistance and work toward reopening the Palestinians' diplomatic mission in Washington.

Biden's **aides** have also made clear they **want to re-establish** the goal of a negotiated two-state solution as a **priority in U.S. policy** on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But they have moved cautiously so far, and any major steps are likely to wait following Israel's inconclusive March election, which will be followed by Palestinian elections scheduled in coming months.

The Trump administration blocked nearly all aid since it severed ties with the Palestinian Authority in 2018. The move was widely seen as an attempt to force the Palestinians to negotiate with Israel on terms the Palestinian leadership branded as an effort to deny them a viable state.

The cuts came after Palestinian leaders decided to boycott the Trump administration's peace efforts over its decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and move the U.S. embassy there from Tel Aviv, upending decades of U.S. policy.

This included rescinding aid to funding for the United Nations Works and Relief Agency (UNWRA), which provides aid and relief services to around 5.7 million registered Palestinian refugees across the Middle East.

The bulk of the restored funding will be funneled to UNWRA while separate economic aid will go through an Economic Support Fund for programs in the West Bank and Gaza, and the development money via the U.S. Agency for International Development, according to a congressional source.

The notice to Congress also said Washington would resume security assistance to the Palestinians, the source said.

However, the administration is likely to hold back for now on resuming direct economic aid to the Palestinian Authority while Biden's aides consult with Congress on potential legal obstacles, according to one person familiar with the matter. The notice to Congress assured lawmakers that all assistance would be consistent with U.S. law.

The money that will go to UNWRA does not immediately restore contributions to the \$365 million level that the U.S. gave to the agency in 2017.

04.07.21

Health Ministry proposes to reopen education, Gantz demanded reopening

04.07.21

Health Ministry to draft outline for 'major' education system reopening

Blue & White officials said they will not support extension of current restrictions on the education system, which are set to expire on Saturday; virus czar proposes scrapping capsule system and weekly PCR COVID tests for students in grades 7-10

Itamar Eichner | Published: 04.07.21 , 18:05

The Health Ministry is set to draft an outline that would see the education system "significantly" reopen from next week in the wake of declining coronavirus cases.

Israel's coronavirus restrictions have almost all been lifted due to the country's high-paced vaccination campaign. However, since children below the age of 16 currently cannot be vaccinated, many curbs on the education system have remained in place but are set to expire this Saturday.

Israeli officials held a meeting on Wednesday afternoon on whether to extend the restrictions beyond this week and Blue & White lawmakers said they will not support an extension to the current curbs.

Defense Minister and Blue & White Chairman Benny Gantz demanded from education and health ministries to draft an outline that would allow for further reopening of the education system as soon as next week.

The emphasis appears to be on grades 7-10, which currently study in class only two days a week and since the start of the pandemic missed many study days.

04.07.21

Trial Audio of News CEO pushed stories positive to PM while criticizing opponents

04.07.21

Netanyahu trial: Audio appears to show Bezeq chief demanding Walla push positive stories about PM

In recording played by prosecutors alleging quid pro quo, Stella Handler is heard demanding that Ilan Yeshua provide more favorable coverage of prime minister; Yeshua tells court that Handler admonished him for 'producing content critical of Bibi and that Bezeq would suffer for it'

Gilad Morag, Nina Fox | Published: 04.07.21 , 13:41

The prosecution in Benjamin Netanyahu's corruption trial on Wednesday played an audio recording of a conversation in which Stella Handler, the former CEO of Bezeq telecommunications company, appears to pressure then-Walla CEO Ilan Yeshua to provide more favorable coverage for the prime minister on the news website.

Wednesday was the third day of the evidentiary stage of the trial at Jerusalem District Court. The prosecution is currently focusing on Case 4000, the first and most serious of three cases against Netanyahu.

The prime minister is accused of conspiring with Shaul Elovitch, who at the time owned both Bezeq and Walla, to provide Netanyahu with positive news coverage in return for favorable telecoms legislation that would be very profitable for Elovitch. Both Elovitch and his wife Iris are defendants in the case.

The start of the evidentiary phase began on Monday, one year and four months after Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit announced charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust against him. He denies any wrongdoing.

The conversation was played in court Wednesday as the prosecution sought to back up Yeshua's prior testimony that he had been instructed to promote articles casting the prime minister and his family in a positive light while criticizing his opponents.

In the recording, Yeshua is heard saying: "There will be a police investigation against me and Shaul. I spoke with Shaul. Now it is clear we definitely cannot do such things. It is

very dangerous. We will be sorry for everything we did, we need to understand the consequences, we are in a dangerous place Stella. The role of journalism is to critique those in power."

04.07.21

Israel mined Iranian Guard support ship for Yemen rebel piracy in the Red Sea Tuesday

04.07.21

NYT: Israel informed U.S. it struck Iranian vessel

Unnamed American official tells the New York Times the attack may have been delayed to allow some distance to be made between American aircraft carrier in the area and the Iranian vessel Saviz, which was identified as a covert military ship operated by Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps

Daniel Salami, Yoav Zitun, AP | Updated: 04.07.21 , 09:18

The New York Times reported Wednesday that Israel informed the United States it had struck an Iranian vessel off the coast of Eritrea in the Red Sea on Tuesday.

An unnamed U.S. official told the newspaper that "the Israelis had called the attack a retaliation for earlier Iranian strikes on Israeli vessels, and that the vessel had been damaged below the water line."

The assault came as Iran and world powers sat down in Vienna for the first talks about the U.S. potentially rejoining Tehran's tattered nuclear deal.

The Iranian news agency Tanzim confirmed the vessel had been hit by mines that were attached to it, and named it as the Saviz, claiming it had been stationed in the Red Sea for the past few years to "support Iranian commandos sent on commercial vessel (anti-piracy) escort missions."

But according to a report published in October by the U.S. Naval Institute, the Saviz was a covert military ship operated by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.

The ship's long presence in the region, repeatedly criticized by Saudi Arabia, has come as the West and United Nations experts say Iran has provided arms and support to Yemen's Houthi rebels amid that country's years-long war. Iran denies arming the Houthis, though components found in the rebels' weaponry link back to Tehran.

A statement attributed to Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh described the ship as a commercial vessel.

"Fortunately, no casualties were reported... and technical investigations are underway," Khatibzadeh said. "Our country will take all necessary measures through international authorities."

The American official told the New York Times that the attack may have been delayed "to allow the Dwight D. Eisenhower, an American aircraft carrier in the area, to put some distance between itself and the Saviz."

The Eisenhower was about 320 kilometers (200 miles) away when the Saviz was hit, the official said.

The Israeli Navy has ramped up its maritime presence in the Red Sea, deploying missile cutters and submarines to the area.

Late last month, Channel 12 reported that Iran fired a missile at an Israeli-owned ship in the Arabian Sea.

The container ship, which was said to be on its way from Tanzania to India, was hit by a small projectile and sustained minimal damage, Channel 12 said. The ship was identified as the LORI, owned by Israeli businessman Udi Angel and registered in Liberia.

The alleged Israeli attack came as the United States began indirect talks with Iran on a return to the 2015 nuclear deal. The Trump administration had withdrawn from the agreement 2018.

World powers met with Iranian officials in Vienna and described the talks as "constructive," and agreed to form working groups to discuss the sanctions Washington might lift and the nuclear curbs Tehran might observe as they try to revive the 2015 nuclear deal.

04.06.21

PM has 28 days to add 9 MKs to a coalition stalled on his criminal charges

04.06.21

After receiving government mandate, Netanyahu says viable coalition 'within reach' Embattled prime minister calls on fellow lawmakers to end their personal boycotts of him and says 'will do everything to get Israel out of the cycle of elections'

Moran Azulay | Published: 04.06.21 , 19:54

After receiving the mandate to form the next government from President Reuven Rivlin, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called on fellow lawmakers Tuesday to end their boycotts of him and join his coalition In an effort to avoid unprecedented fifth elections in two years.

"I will do everything to get Israel out of the cycle of elections. We will form a strong government — not a government of stagnation, but a government of action," the premier said. "It's time to stop the personal boycotts and disqualifications,"

He added that the "task at hand was not simple but within reach."

"Just like how we brought about the economic stimulus plan to all citizens of Israel; just like how we acted to fortify our security and achieve peace with Arab countries that

served all Israeli citizens — what interests me first is the historic mission to secure the existence and future of the State of Israel."

Israel's longest-serving prime minister said he considers himself "the prime minister of everyone" and vowed that a government under his leadership would continue investing large sums in Israel's Arab sector which suffers from crumbling infrastructure and high crime and poverty rates.

Netanyahu also mentioned the Iranian threat and reiterated his commitment to prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear capabilities. He also promised to fight the International Criminal Court's "absurd decision to accuse our soldiers, commanders of war crimes" against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

Netanyahu received the recommendations of 52 lawmakers in the 120-member Knesset in Rivlin's consultations on Monday, as Jerusalem District Court saw the start of the evidentiary stage of the prime minister's trial for bribery, fraud and breach of trust. Centrist Opposition Leader Yair Lapid of the Yesh Atid party got 45 endorsements and former defense minister Naftali Bennett of the far-right Yamina got seven — all from his own party.

The breakaway right-wing New Hope led by former Likud minister Gideon Saar and the two predominantly Arab parties, Joint List and Ra'am, declined to endorse any candidate, leaving their combined 16 seats in the wind. Pleas from both Netanyahu and Lapid for support to make up their respective majority shortfalls went unanswered.

The deadlock over recommendations was a reflection of the political stalemate in the country, which held elections on March 23 — the fourth time in two years — only for the outcome to again be inconclusive.

Rivlin was reluctant to task the incumbent to form a new government and said that he felt none of the candidates had a chance of putting together a viable coalition but as he was obliged by law, he was resigned to tap Netanyahu.

"I know the position held by many, that the president should not give the role to a candidate that is facing criminal charges, but according to the law and the decision of the courts, a prime minister can continue in his role even when he is facing charges," Rivlin said in a televised address from his Jerusalem residence.

"Moreover, the question of giving the role to a candidate facing criminal charges was one of intense political and public disagreement over the recent election campaigns," he said. But, Rivlin said, the decision "on the substantive and ethical question of the fitness of a candidate facing criminal charges to serve as prime minister" was not his to make.

"The President of the State of Israel is not a substitute for the legislature or for the judiciary," he said. "In this situation and in the absence of other options, I received my decision in accordance with the map of recommenders, which indicates a slightly higher chance of MK Benjamin Netanyahu forming a government," Rivlin concluded.

Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid said in response that although Rivlin "fulfilled his duty and was left with no other choice," his decision to task Netanyahu with the formation of Israel's next government was "a mark of shame for Israel and a shame for its status as a law-abiding state."

Naftali Bennett, who heads Yamina, on the other hand, was less pessimistic, telling reporters he "wishes luck" to Netanyahu in his attempt to form a coalition. "We will leave no stone unturned on a mission to prevent fifth elections, but without sacrificing our values," he said.

Netanyahu, who is Israel's longest-serving leader and in power consecutively since 2009, now has 28 days to try to put together a coalition.

He can request a two-week extension from Rivlin, who has the option of later assigning the task to someone else if the prime minister is unsuccessful.

04.05.21

Netanyahu leads PM endorsements over Lapid & Bennett power-share

04.05.21

Netanyahu musters most PM endorsements after New Hope abstains

With 52 backers, Likud chairman best positioned to receive government mandate; Lapid says offered Bennett power-sharing deal, with Yamina leader first to lead, calls on potential partners to stand strong against Netanyahu

Sivan Hillaie, Moran Azulay, Itamar Eichner | Published: 04.05.21 , 20:39

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday won a plurality of nominations by his fellow lawmakers to form the next government and potentially keep his position.

The Likud chairman became the likely forerunner after ally-turned-foe Gideon Saar's New Hope decided to abstain and not recommend any candidate for prime minister to President Reuven Rivlin, thus ensuring Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will have to most endorsements.

Netanyahu received 52 votes, while Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid had 45 and Yamina chief Naftali Bennett had seven.

Netanyahu has been backed by his own Likud Party (30 votes) and his right-wing electoral bloc, constituting of the ultra-Orthodox Shas (9) and United Torah Judaism parties (7) and the Religious Zionist alliance (6).

Lapid was backed by his own party (17), Blue & White (8), Yisrael Beiteinu (7), Labor (7) and Meretz (6).

Bennett was backed by his own party which holds seven seats in the next Knesset.

The Arab Ra'am (4) and Joint List (6) parties joined New Hope (6) in refusing to endorse a candidate.

In his first public statement since the March 23 election, Lapid said that he offered Naftali Bennett to form a government on a rotational basis, with the Yamina leader first to serve as prime minister.

He urged his potential partners to stand firm against Benjamin Netanyahu's attempts to dismantle their parties in order to garner the majority he needs.

"[Netanyahu] has no government, he has no majority, he is beholden to the extremists. This is a long game, the winner will be the one who is determined enough, patient enough and focused on their objectives," he said.

"There has never been a more just political battle and it will only end with our victory." Earlier, New Hope representatives requested President Rivlin to broker a power-sharing agreement between Lapid and Bennett.

04.05.21

Netanyahu on trial: 'This is what an attempted coup looks like'
Prosecution, Police & media colluded & erased investigation records for PM coup

04.05.21

Netanyahu on trial: 'This is what an attempted coup looks like'
PM claims prosecution is holding a 'witch-hunt' against him, lists a slew of alleged transgressions on law enforcement's side leading up to his corruption trial
i24NEWS| Updated: 04.05.21 , 19:25

After appearing in court for his corruption trial, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu lambasted on Monday the State Prosecution, Israel Police and the media, alleging they have conspired to stage a political coup against him.

"The prosecution is on a witch-hunt. They were looking for me. Whitewashed investigations, conducted illegal searches and erased recordings. And the worst of all: It blackmailed witnesses with severe threats to the point of breaking up families," Netanyahu said at a press conference. "This is what an attempted coup looks like."

"When the police commissioner blamed me for sending private investigators against him, when a witch-hunt of this magnitude is effectuated against me and my family, it is very difficult," he maintained.

"This is not something that is supposed to take place in a democracy," the premier continued. "I cannot hold myself back on this, therefore I am saying these things here and in great pain."

Earlier on Monday, the evidentiary stage of Netanyahu's graft trial began at the Jerusalem District Court, where the state's lead prosecutor, Liat Ben-Ari, told the judges that the incumbent prime minister was involved in "a serious case of government corruption."

Netanyahu denies all wrongdoing and claims that the media, police, and state prosecution are colluding to oust him from power.

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04.05.21

Abbas flown to Jordan ahead of 'medical checkup' in Germany

04.05.21

Abbas flown to Jordan ahead of 'medical checkup' in Germany

Palestinian president's office does not provide any further details on trip that was not announced in advance, only saying in statement that 85-year-old leader will undergo routine health checks in European country

Associated Press | Published: 04.05.21 , 15:37

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was flown to Jordan by helicopter on Monday ahead of an official visit to Germany on which he will undergo a health exam, officials said.

His office did not provide any further details on the trip, which was not announced in advance.

A Palestinian official said Abbas would undergo a "routine health check" in Germany. The official was not authorized to comment and so spoke on condition of anonymity.

The 85-year-old Abbas, a heavy smoker with a history of heart problems, has attended public events in recent days and there was no indication he was ill. He received the first dose of a coronavirus vaccine last month.

The president has traveled abroad for medical treatment in recent years, however. In 2018, he visited a hospital in the United States after appearing weak in an address to the UN Security Council and in 2019 was operated on in Germany. He underwent an emergency heart procedure in 2016 after suffering exhaustion and chest pains, but was given a clean bill of health and quickly discharged from the West Bank hospital.

Abbas has never chosen a successor and a number of senior members of his Fatah party are believed to be eyeing the position. Abbas took over as caretaker president following the death of the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in 2004.

Arafat too was airlifted for treatment in Europe, flying in a French helicopter to a Paris military base where he died several weeks later.

Abbas was elected to a four-year term the following year but remained in office after his mandate expired. The Palestinians have not held elections since 2006, when the Islamic militant group Hamas won a landslide victory in parliamentary elections.

That ignited a political crisis, culminating in Hamas' seizure of power in Gaza the following year, leaving Abbas' authority confined to parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Abbas has decreed parliamentary elections for next month and a presidential election in July. It's unclear whether the votes will take place, however, due to the longstanding dispute with Hamas and growing schisms within Abbas' Fatah party that could lead him to call them off.

The Palestinian leader's popularity has plummeted in recent years as he has failed to make progress in achieving an independent state or mending ties with Hamas, and as he has presided over an increasingly authoritarian Palestinian Authority.

04.04.21

IAF Gulfstream jet monitors by radar, Syria, Lebanon & Gaza at the same time

04.04.21

Israeli Air Force debuts new advanced spy aircraft

After nearly 8 years in development, retrofitted civilian plane turned intel-gathering jet set to take to the skies, boasting cutting-edge sensors, data collection equipment and state-of-the-art radar system

Yoav Zitun | Published: 04.04.21, 20:58

The Defense Ministry on Sunday debuted the Israeli Air Force's (IAF) new advanced intelligence-gathering aircraft.

The plane, dubbed "Oron", is a Gulfstream G550 business jet outfitted with the latest sensors and data collection equipment, allowing it to rapidly locate targets in all weather conditions, with the centerpiece of the aircraft being its state-of-the-art radar system.

The aircraft, which had been under development for nearly 8 years, was showcased at the Nevatim Airbase in southern Israel and will begin operations in the coming days under the Air Force's 122 "Nahshon" Squadron.

The squadron already operates the G500 Shavit and the G550 Eitam jets for airborne early warning and control and three are used for signals intelligence.

"This plane has an unprecedented large-scale target gathering capabilities, which will be rallied in realtime to the Air Force and the Intelligence Directorate, and make it possible to monitor enemy activities and launches from Syria, Lebanon and the Gaza Strip at the same time," said Brig. Gen. Yaniv Rotem, head of the Defense Ministry's Research and Development Department.

04.04.21

Smotrich urges MK's to back Netanyahu or embrace of the left will blind you

04.04.21

Smotrich urges Bennett to back Netanyahu for PM

Far-right lawmaker warns former ally, who is speculated to recommend himself for premier, that 'any recommendation you make tomorrow that is not Netanyahu will put us on the fast track toward a left-wing government'

Moran Azulay | Published: 04.04.21 , 20:34

A day before Israel's party leaders arrive at President Reuven Rivlin's residence in Jerusalem for consultations, Religious Zionist party chief Bezael Smotrich on Sunday urged Yamina Chairman Naftali Bennett to back Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to form the next government.

Speaking at a press conference, the far-right lawmaker warned the former Netanyahu ally, who is speculated to recommend himself for prime minister, that "any recommendation you make tomorrow that is not Netanyahu will put us on the fast track toward a left-wing government."

"Naftali, I am afraid that the embrace of the left is blinding you — and I am here to tell you unequivocally: Do not prevent the formation of a right-wing government tomorrow," he added.

The consultations will be broadcast live at Rivlin's own request. Each party will be given 15 minutes, during which the president will ask each representative for their first and second pick for premier, and another 15 minutes to address the press.

Neither the anti- nor pro-Netanyahu blocs seem to have a clear 61-seat majority in the 120-strong Knesset to form a viable coalition government, with the right-wing Yamina and Islamist Ra'am parties positioned as potential kingmakers.

In an appeal to both Bennett and fellow right-wing legislator New Hope Chairman Gideon Saar, Smotrich conjured their past promises to prevent Yesh Atid head Yair Lapid from forming a government.

He also reiterated his past statements, ruling out entering a government backed by Ra'am. Last week, the Religious Zionist alliance and Smotrich's spiritual leader, Rabbi Chaim Druckman, said that there was no room for a right-wing government with Ra'am and its leader Mansour Abbas.

"[Abbas] is an Arab who does not recognize the existence of Israel as a Jewish state, is that truly right-wing?" queried Druckman, who also called on Bennett and Saar to join Prime Minister Netanyahu in forming a government.

04.01.21

Abbas of Arab sector refused pledge his allegiance to any bloc support

04.01.21

Ra'am chair calls for Jewish-Arab cooperation, says doesn't rule out working with anyone

Addressing the nation in Hebrew, Arab lawmaker calls for 'coexistence between the different communities living in the Holy Land', does not pledge his allegiance to any Knesset bloc, says beholden only to his constituents
Hassan Shaalan| Published: 04.01.21 , 21:08

In a televised prime time press conference, Ra'am Chairman Mansour Abbas called on Thursday for cooperation between Israel's Arab and Jewish communities but did not name which candidate he would recommend to the president to form the next government.

"I extend a hand in my name and in the name of the members of the Arab public that elected us to create a chance of a shared life in the Holy Land," Abbas said. "I stand here and say that the time has come, and it is the time to listen to the other, to recognize the narrative and look for the common denominator.

"The State of Israel is changing and it refuses to open its eyes. We do not have to agree on everything, we will certainly have disagreements, but we owe it to ourselves, the right and opportunity to get to recognize one another."

The small Islamist party has emerged as an unlikely kingmaker following the March 23 vote as neither bloc has enough seats to form a coalition government, but Abbas said he was not "blinded" by his status and refused to say which parliamentary bloc he will support.

"I have been described in many ways before and after this speech. The éminence grise, the kingmaker and many others," he said. "I am not blinded by this nor I seek anybody's approval. I do not want to be part of any bloc on the right or left. I'm here in a different bloc, the bloc that elected me to serve my people and gave me the mandate to turn the demands of the Arab public, which for years remained demands, into a real tangible plan. Abbas (holding flag) and Ra'am supporters celebrate electoral gains in election for 24th Knesset

"I urge all of us to change this reality. We're here to look ahead, and we expect others on the left and right to adopt our approach. Innovation is largely about creating change in an existing climate. We live in the same old climate, and it's time for a change."

In his speech, Abbas described the burning issues bedeviling the Arab sector, such as crumbling infrastructure and high crime and poverty rates, and described other problems shared by the Jewish community such as the shortage in hospital beds while not mentioning the Palestinian issue.

Before Abbas' speech, Blue & White Chairman Benny Gantz called on the Arab lawmaker not to support a government headed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. "Israeli Arabs have been harmed in recent years by a series of actions led by Netanyahu. This has not changed, and it will not change." Gantz said. "Now that he needs you, he will tell you stories and promise everything — he is lying. All he wants is one vote, to overthrow the [current] government [in which Blue & White has an equal voting right as Netanyahu's Likud party], and then when he no longer needs you, all promises will go into the garbage bin of history."

Far-right activist and number 3 in the Religious Zionist alliance, Adv. Itamar Ben-Gvir, said that in his speech, Abbas was trying to portray himself as a "cute teddy bear."

Ben-Gvir slammed Abbas' ties to the Islamic movement, to which Ra'am is affiliated, a movement the Kahanist said, "supports Hamas and sanctifies baby killers."

He called on right-wing parties — including Naftali Bennett's Yamina and Gideon Saar's New Hope which are not part of Prime Minister Netanyahu's right-wing bloc — to form a government together without relying on Ra'am.

"A coalition that relies on Abbas will be the end of the right. A coalition with the Joint List and Meretz will send Bennett and Saar home," he said.

Likud's Deputy Health Minister Yoav Kisch said Abbas represents a part of **Israel's Arab sector** that wishes to live in peace with the country's Jewish majority.

"I was glad to hear **Abbas**," he said, "The joint List does not represent the Arab citizens of Israel who want to live in peace in Israel. Today, we saw that this voice **has another representation in the Knesset.**"

04.07.21

Israel slams Biden funding UNRWA for Palestine two-state solution

04.07.21

Israel slams Biden's resumption of UNRWA funding for Palestinians

US President Joe Biden had promised during his campaign for the presidency that he would resume such funding, but has yet to make good on his pledge.

By TOVAH LAZAROFF **APRIL 7, 2021** 22:28

Israel warned the Biden administration that its decision **Wednesday** to restore **funding** to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (**UNRWA**) **would only help perpetuate the conflict.**

"Israel's position is that the organization in its current form perpetuates the conflict and does not contribute to its resolution. The renewal of UNRWA assistance, therefore, must be accompanied by substantial and necessary changes in the nature, goals and conduct of the organization," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

It added that US President Joe **Biden's decision to reverse** his predecessor Donald Trump's 2018 **policy** decision to halt funding to UNRWA had been come up in conversation between Israeli and American officials.

Israel's Ambassador to the UN Gilad Erdan said he had also warned the State Department of the danger of such activity, particularly without ensuring that "incitement" and "antisemitic content" are removed from its educational curriculum.

"Israel is strongly opposed to the anti-Israel and antisemitic activity happening in UNRWA's facilities," Erdan said.

"We believe that this U.N. agency for so-called "refugees" should not exist in its current format. UNRWA schools regularly use materials that incite against Israel and the twisted definition used by the agency to determine who is a "refugee" only perpetuates the conflict.

Israel strongly opposes renewing funding for @UNRWA, an anti-Semitic agency that incites against Israel and uses a twisted definition of who is a "refugee." Rather than solving the conflict, UNRWA perpetuates it. Any return to funding it must be contingent on essential reforms. pic.twitter.com/52oHtv0prz

— Ambassador Gilad Erdan גילד ערדן (@giladerdan1) April 7, 2021

The Trump administration had agreed with Israel's assessment of UNRWA, stopping \$350 million in annual contribution and at least \$200 million in additional assistances. Biden on Wednesday restored close to half of that funding, including for security assistance.

"The United States is pleased to announce that, working with Congress, we plan to restart U.S. economic, development, and humanitarian assistance for the Palestinian people," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement he issued.

"This includes \$75 million in economic and development assistance in the West Bank and Gaza, \$10 million for peace-building programs through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and \$150 million in humanitarian assistance for the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)," Blinken said. The \$235 million is in addition to \$15 million the US pledged for the Palestinians in March.

"All assistance will be provided consistent with U.S. law," he said adding that it would go to humanitarian assistance such as battling the COVID-19 pandemic and basic needs such as food and water.

Blinken specially mentioned support for UNRWA's education program, and pledged his country's support for a two-state resolution to the conflict.

"The US is committed to advancing prosperity, security, and freedom for both Israelis and Palestinians in tangible ways in the immediate term, which is important in its own right, but also as a means to advance towards a negotiated two-state solution," Blinken said.

UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters in New York he hoped the US restoration of funding would sway other countries to do likewise.

"There were a number of countries that had greatly reduced or halted contributions to UNRWA. We hope that the American decision will lead others to rejoin... as UNRWA donors," Dujarric said.

Among the Trump administration and Israeli objections to UNRWA, is its classification of descendants of some 750,000 Palestinians who fled their homes as a result of the 1948 War of Independence, and who now live in east Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria, as refugees.

UNRWA, which provides food assistance as well as health and education services, has sought a \$1.5 billion budget to serve 5.7 million refugees. UNRWA opponents are concerned that an ever-expanding refugee definition creates a stumbling block to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The right of return for refugees to sovereign Israel is one of the core topics that would be part of negotiations for a two-state resolution to the conflict.

At the UN on Wednesday, UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini took issue with these allegations, stating that it was important to defend the organization's mandate as well as the rights of Palestinian refugees.

There are, he said, "growing defamatory campaigns" against UNRWA. "These nasty and incessant campaigns aim at harming UNRWA's reputation, weakening its mandate and erasing the Palestinian refugee issue" and trying to strip "UNRWA from its funding base," Lazzarini added.

"This campaign often uses misinformation to shock our donors and supporters to drive [UNRWA] into a highly politicized" arena that deflects focus away from people in need, Lazzarini contended.

"Most recently UNRWA has been under attack for allegedly promoting hate in the education material it produced during the pandemic," he said.

"UNRWA strongly rejects these allegations. The agency has a zero tolerance policy for incitement to violence and discrimination.

"UNRWA is committed to upholding the highest level of neutrality and human rights and tolerance," Lazzarini said.

UNRWA is facing economic hardship, Lazzarini said, with its donor contributions falling to its 2013 level at a time when needs are rising due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The year "2020 has been an extremely challenging year for Palestinian refugees,"

Lazzarini said, adding that he was not able to fully pay his staff.

Unemployment and poverty was already high prior to the pandemic, but now he said, he was "extremely alarmed" by the level of challenges facing Palestinian refugees.

"People are struggling daily to ensure one meal to their families, no one should feel so desperate," he said.

"2021 will continue to be a challenging year," Lazzarini said, but added he was hopeful that US funding would help alleviate some of that strain.

Reuters contributed to this report.