

The Diplomatic Report: A Monthly Review of Israel's Regional Foreign Policies

Issue 46 (February 2021)

Dr. Roeë Kibrik*

March 2021

A. Israel and the Palestinians

- **The International Community Resumes Its Engagement in the Peace Process** - The French, German, Egyptian and Jordanian ambassadors to Israel, also known as the "[Munich Group](#)", met with Ushpiz, the Director-General of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), while the group's Consul-Generals met with Palestinian Foreign Minister al-Maliki. The Munich Group's diplomats presented an outline of confidence building measures that include, among other proposals, the transfer of vaccines to the Palestinians, a freeze on settlement building, and reforming the payment system that Palestinian prisoners in Israel receive from the Palestinian Authority. The Israeli and Palestinian representatives expressed their preference to wait with the measures until the Biden administration enters the field. The representatives of the Quartet (US, UN, EU and Russia) [met virtually](#) and decided to meet again regularly after the Quartet apparatus was largely inactive during Trump's presidency. US Secretary of State Blinken [spoke](#) with his Israeli counterpart Foreign Minister Ashkenazi and reiterated the US support for the two-state solution.
- **Creeping Annexation** - The executive committee of Keren Kayemeth Le'Israel's (Jewish National Fund, KKL-JNF) [voted](#) to change the organization's policy in the West Bank to allow for the purchasing of private lands for the development of Jewish settlements and to [allocate](#) 38 million NIS for this purpose. The decision, criticized by Meretz and the US Reform Movement, will be [finalized](#) after the Israeli elections, at the request of Defense Minister Gantz. US State Department Spokesman Price [urged](#) Israel to avoid unilateral steps in the Palestinian territories, and Palestinian Prime Minister Shtayyeh [accused](#) Israel of consistently destroying the two-state solution by building settlements.
- **International Humanitarian Aid to Gaza Continues** - Qatar, the EU, and the UN [brokered](#) an agreement that will install a gas supply system running from Israel to the Gaza Strip. The EU pledged 5 million USD, Qatar will fund the pipeline's construction, and the Israeli energy company Delek will sell the gas to the Palestinian Authority. Israeli Minister of Energy Steinitz [stated that](#) the agreement was signed in coordination with Israel and received its consent. Egypt and the Palestinian Authority have ceremoniously [signed](#) an MoU in Ramallah to develop the gas fields off the shores of the Gaza Strip. Israel [permitted](#) the Palestinian Authority to transfer 2,000 Russian-made Sputnik

* Dr. Roeë Kibrik is Director of Research at the Mitvim Institute. Gall Olle Sigler assisted in preparing the report, which is published in cooperation with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

vaccines from the West Bank to Gaza in order to vaccinate 1,000 people. An additional shipment of around 20,000 vaccines from the UAE [arrived](#) in the Gaza Strip through the Rafah border crossing, credited to Dahlan, an old-time rival of Palestinian Authority President Abbas. The Norwegian Foreign Minister and the High Representative of the European Commission for Foreign Affairs Borrell, [led](#) a meeting of donors for the Palestinians, which also included representatives from Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and the US.

- **Israel is in No Rush to Take Responsibility for Vaccinating the Palestinians** - Israel [transferred](#) 5,000 Moderna vaccines to the Palestinian Authority, in addition to other contributions the Palestinian Authority received and transferred through Israel, [including](#) 10,000 vaccines from Russia. The Director-General of the Israeli Ministry of Health [met](#) with senior Palestinian officials and agreed to vaccinate 100,000 Palestinian working in Israel. The Israeli government [authorized](#) the vaccination campaign, also using [Moderna's](#) vaccines, starting on March. The Palestinian Authority and the Wakf have [denied](#) an Israeli request to open a vaccination center at the Temple Mount/al-Haram a-Sharif. Israel [faced](#) international criticism for sitting on a surplus of Moderna vaccinations, while barely releasing any to vaccinate the Palestinians. The criticism was [reiterated](#) by US Senator Sanders who argued that Israel holds the responsibility to vaccinate the Palestinians as the occupying power. The Knesset's Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defense also [discussed](#) the subject of vaccinations to the Palestinians, which transformed into a hot political debate. The Israeli NGO Combatants for Peace sent a letter to Pfizer and Moderna to [restrict](#) Israel from exporting the vaccines to countries around the world before vaccinating the Palestinians under its control.
- **Israel Works Against the International Criminal Court's Decision** - The International Criminal Court in The Hague (ICC) [announced](#) it has jurisdiction to investigate alleged crimes in the Palestinian territories. The Palestinians [welcomed](#) the decision and [urged](#) the ICC to launch an investigation into Israeli war crimes. Israel denounced the decision, with Prime Minister Netanyahu and the security cabinet [describing](#) it as antisemitic. The Israeli MFA [rejected](#) the ICC's jurisdiction and Ashkenazi [added](#) that the decision distorts the law and turns the ICC into an anti-Israel political pawn. The MFA [sent](#) its ambassadors around the world instructions to urgently lobby heads of government and countries to pressure the ICC to block any investigation against Israel. The new ICC prosecutor Khan was reportedly [supported](#) behind the scenes by Israel and the US. Both [Netanyahu](#) and [Ashkenazi](#) asked their American counterparts to maintain US sanctions on the ICC imposed by Trump. Following his [conversation](#) with Ashkenazi, German Foreign Minister Haas [emphasized](#) Germany's position that the ICC has no jurisdiction in the Palestinian territories. In addition to Germany, Australia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Austria, Brazil, Uganda and Canada also [expressed](#) their opposition to the investigation. US State Department Spokesman Price [stated](#) that the US has serious concerns about the ICC's attempt to exercise its jurisdiction over Israeli personnel, as Israel never ratified the Rome Statute that established the ICC. EU Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Stano [said](#) the ICC and its prosecutors are independent and impartial judicial institutions with no political objectives to pursue.
- **Elections in the Palestinian Authority** - Israel [allowed](#) senior Palestinian official al-Sheikh, a close Abbas confidant, to visit Barghouti in the Israeli prison to persuade him not to run in the upcoming Palestinian elections against Abbas. Al-Sheikh also [said](#) that the Palestinians will formally ask Israel to allow prisoners to vote in the elections.

- **The Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Israeli Election** - The leader of the Labor Party, Michaeli, [emphasized](#) the importance of the two-state solution to Israel's future. The leader of the Yesh Atid party, Lapid, [clarified](#) that he has no issue with building within the settlement blocs but does oppose building outside the blocs as it prevents a future solution. The leader of Meretz, Horowitz, and Labor Party candidate Kariv, both [denounced](#) the KKL-JNF's new West Bank policy. Meretz's Golan [said](#) Israel has a humanitarian duty to transfer vaccines to the Gaza Strip. Tibi from the Joint List [added](#) that Israel also has the responsibility to do so as the occupying power, while politicians from the Israeli right said Israel should pass the vaccines only as a return for a prisoner swap. Deputy Minister Mulla from the Likud [reached](#) out to the Palestinian Authority for their support and the Israeli Arab population support in the Israeli elections. Al-Ajami, a member of the PLO's Committee for Interaction with Israeli Society, [clarified](#) that the Palestinian Authority does not intend to intervene in the Israeli elections, however if it did, then it would support the Joint List. Cassif from the Joint List [called](#) on the international community to stop Israel's ethnic cleansing and occupation.

B. Israel and the Middle East

- **Formal Diplomatic Ties with the UAE** - Netanyahu's formal visit to the UAE and Bahrain that was [planned](#) for the beginning of February was postponed for the third time. The UAE [appointed](#) al-Khajah as its first ambassador to Israel. Ushpiz [welcomed](#) the ambassador on his appointment. After a delegation from the UAE [arrived](#) in Israel to prepare for the embassy opening, and after the embassy [opened](#) an official Twitter account, al-Khajah [arrived](#) in Jerusalem to meet Ashkenazi and later presented his diplomatic credentials to President Rivlin. Al-Khajah [congratulated](#) Israel and the UAE on their successful vaccination campaigns. Emirati Interior Minister al-Nahyan thanked the Israeli Ministry of Internal Security in Hebrew, after the latter [congratulated](#) the UAE, in Arabic, on its Mars probe "Hope" success entering Mars' orbit. Ashkenazi also [congratulated](#) the UAE on this achievement. After Biden entered office, the Abraham Fund, created following the signing of the Abraham Accords, [remained](#) without a managing director after Lightstone left the position.
- **Civil and Economic Relations with the UAE** - The Israeli government sought ways to [return](#) hundreds of Israelis that were [left stranded](#) in the UAE after the immediate closure of Ben-Gurion airport. Israeli companies [participated](#) in a major defense exhibition in the UAE, although Israel [cancelled](#) its formal participation. Beitar Jerusalem football club [cancelled](#) the sale of 50 percent of the club to Emirati businessman Bin Khalifa after the football association's investigation found significant gaps in the Emirati's wealth statements. The UAE's "Hope" Mars mission lead engineer, al-Awadhi, gave an [interview](#) to the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation. Grant, the former head coach of the Israeli national football team, [participated](#) in Dubai Sports Council's football player development program. The Mohamed Bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence and the Weizmann Institute of Science [launched](#) a joint program for artificial intelligence research. Gulf-Israel Green Ventures (GIGV) and the UAE's United Stars Group have [signed](#) a first-of-its-kind deal that will bring Israeli green technologies to the UAE and the wider Gulf region, and Emirati technologies to Israel.
- **Advancing ties with Bahrain** - Netanyahu [spoke](#) with Bahraini Crown Prince al-Khalifa about the [resumption](#) of the Iran nuclear talks. Al-Khalifa reiterated his invitation for Netanyahu to visit Bahrain. Jewish communities in six Gulf states [joined](#) under one

association of Gulf Jewish communities under the leadership of Rabbi Abadie and Ebrahim Dawood Nonoo.

- Resumption of Diplomatic Relations with Morocco** - Israel and Morocco [opened](#) diplomatic liaison offices, with Govrin heading the Israeli mission and Byoud, who [met](#) with Ashkenazi on his arrival, leading the Moroccan mission. The first inter-ministerial coordination meeting to promote relations between Israel and Morocco [announced](#) that five agreements were signed and five others will be signed in the future. The Israeli government [approved](#) the aviation agreement between the countries. Israeli Minister of Internal Security Ohana [spoke](#) with Moroccan Interior Minister Laftit and invited him to Israel. Israel Minister of Education Galant also [spoke](#) with his counterpart Amzazi, and the two agreed to promote student exchange programs and educational trips that would emphasize the history of the Moroccan Jewish population. Many Israeli ambassadors around the world have [met](#) with their Moroccan counterparts since the countries decided to resume diplomatic ties. Moroccan Foreign Minister Bourita [highlighted](#) the potential cooperation between Israel and Morocco and Morocco's ability to mediate between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in a virtual conference of the Brookings Institute.
- Normalization with Saudi Arabia?** - Despite the anger in Saudi Arabia towards Israel over the leak of the meeting between Netanyahu and Bin Salman, it was reported that senior Israeli and Saudi officials [spoke](#) in the wake of Biden's victory. The Saudis raised concerns about the new administration's policy towards Iran and human rights. The Saudi newspaper Asharq al-Awsat [covered](#) Netanyahu's trial on its first page. A new Israeli development of artificial corneas [attracted](#) a great deal of interest on social media in Arab countries, including Iran and Saudi Arabia.
- Attempts to Decrease Tensions with Jordan** - Amidst numerous reports of Ashkenazi's meetings with his Jordanian counterpart, it was also reported that Gantz secretly [met](#) Jordan's King Abdullah. King Abdullah [tweeted](#) that it was time to turn towards conflict resolution. Jordan's Foreign Minister Safadi [highlighted](#) the importance of cooperating with Israel, especially when it comes to water issues. He also expressed his optimism that Biden's election will reinvigorate the Middle East peace process. In an open letter to Israeli newspaper Yediot Ahronot, Prince Hassan, the King's uncle, [said](#) that the path to peace between Israel and the Arab world can only be achieved through Palestinian statehood with East Jerusalem as its capital first.
- Egyptian Public Remains Reluctant to Normalize Ties with Israel** - During the first visit of an Egyptian minister in five years, Minister of Energy el-Molla [arrived](#) in Israel and met with Rivlin, Netanyahu, Ashkenazi and Steinitz. The construction of a gas pipeline from the Leviathan gas field to liquefied natural gas terminals in Egypt was [signed](#) in a meeting attended by the head of Israel's National Security Council Ben Shabbat, the chairman of the Egyptian Natural Gas Holding Company Galal, the Israeli and Egyptian ambassadors Oron and Azmi, and Energy Ministers Steinitz and el-Molla. El-Molla's visit received heightened exposure in Israel but [not in Egypt](#), as the opposition in Egyptian society to normalization with Israel persists. Netanyahu [examined](#) the possibility of visiting Egypt on the eve of the elections, but the Egyptian President made this conditional upon a gesture to the Palestinians, thus the visit did not materialize. Gantz [told](#) Egypt's al-Ghad news channel that normalizing relations between Israel and Arab countries is the path towards a safe Middle East. The news channel, funded by the Emirates, was [attacked](#) on social media after the interview. Israeli and Egyptian

ambassadors to the US [met](#) and discussed strengthening collaborations between the countries. Egypt's Deputy Education Minister Hegazy [announced](#) that Egyptian students will learn religious values and verses common in the three Abrahamic religions. Dr. Lavie and Egyptian sociologist Shalaby have [co-authored](#) a paper published by the Institute for National Security Studies. Egyptian singer Mounir was attacked on social media after he [announced](#) that he will perform in Israel and Ramallah as an ambassador of peace.

- **Conflict with Iran** - After many delays, Netanyahu finally [convened](#) the team entrusted with formalizing Israel's policy on the Iran nuclear deal. Netanyahu appointed Ben Shabbat to be in charge of liaising with the Biden administration; he also appointed former heads of the National Security Council Amidror and Nagal, who are known for their opposition to the deal. Ben Shabbat [discussed Iran with](#) his US counterpart Sullivan, and Israel accepted Sullivan's offer to reconvene a strategic working group on Iran, with the first round of talks on intelligence surrounding the Iranian nuclear program. The Iranian issue continues to provoke public debate as Gantz and Ashkenazi demonstrated a [willingness](#) to return to an improved deal. [Meretz](#), the [Labor](#) and [Yesh Atid parties](#) all support reaching an improved deal, while [New Hope's](#) Saar expressed support to the continued imposition of sanctions. The Prime Minister's Office [issued](#) a [statement](#) opposing the nuclear deal, and it was announced that Israel will continue to [press](#) European countries to refrain from returning to the old nuclear deal. Israel [blamed](#) Iran for attacking the Israeli-owned ship that sailed in the Gulf.
- **Russia Mediates between Israel and Syria** - Russia [helped](#) Israel retrieve an Israeli that crossed the border to Syria and who was held by the regime. As part of the deal [negotiated](#) by Ben Shabbat, which was initially put under a [gag order](#), Israel freed two Syrian shepherds it arrested at the border and [agreed](#) to pay more than 1 million USD to supply Russian-made Covid-19 vaccines to Syria. Israel continued to [strike](#) Iranian forces and proxies in Syria [throughout](#) the month. Blinken [recognized](#) the Golan Heights' defensive importance for Israel but questioned the legality of Trump's declaration regarding Israel's sovereignty over the Golan. In response, the Prime Minister's Office [stated](#) that the Golan will forever stay under Israel's sovereignty.

C. Israel and Europe

- **Europe Remains Committed to the Two-State Solution** - In a [letter](#) initiated by Israeli public figures, a group of 442 parliamentarians from 22 European countries [urged](#) the EU foreign policy chief and the EU's 27 foreign ministers to prevent the de facto Israeli annexation of the West Bank. 82 British parliamentarians [wrote](#) a letter to the British Foreign Secretary to do everything in his power to prevent the forced evictions and dispossession of Palestinian families in occupied East Jerusalem. The EU [warned](#) Kosovo that its decision to locate its embassy in Jerusalem will have repercussions on its accession to the EU.
- **Opportunities to Strengthen Ties with Europe** - The EU published the renewal of its [program](#) towards its Southern Neighbourhood, including Israel, for the upcoming years. The program seeks to promote stability, cooperation and peace through significant European investment in regional cooperation fighting the climate crisis, political instability and the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. During the program's presentation, the EU [reaffirmed](#) its support for recent normalization between Israel and several Arab countries. Lapid, the leader of the Yesh Atid party, met with the EU's ambassadors to

Israel and said that Israel must improve its relationship with the EU. The EU mission in Israel [joined](#) the efforts to clean Israeli beaches polluted by the tar spill.

- **Improving Bilateral Relations with European Countries** - Israel and Kosovo officially [established](#) diplomatic relations in a ceremony held via video conference. Israel and the Netherlands [held](#) an online dialogue that focused on political and economic cooperation as well as joint challenges. Netanyahu [spoke](#) with Denmark's Prime Minister Frederiksen about possible cooperation on the research, development and manufacturing of vaccines. French ambassador to Israel Danon [expressed](#) his solidarity with Israel and communities along the coast that have been affected by the massive tar spill.

D. Israel and the Mediterranean

- **Israel Strengthens its Alliance with the Hellenic States** - Israel and Greece [signed](#) a tourism agreement after the Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis and Greek Foreign and Tourism ministers, [visited](#) Israel and met with their Israeli [counterparts](#). The Cypriot President Anastasiades headed a delegation of ministers in a [visit](#) to Israel, where they met with Netanyahu, [Rivlin](#), [Gantz](#), [Ashkenazi](#) and [Steinitz](#). Among the topics that were discussed were [promoting](#) tourism during the Covid-19 crisis, joint military exercises, and collaboration on gas issues in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Greek authorities [allowed](#) Israeli investigators to investigate one of the ships suspected of the tar spill off the Israeli coast on Greek soil.