

# The Sabra Report

Raising Awareness and Encouraging Discussion About Israel

## Israel Tightens Its Grip on The Golan Heights

The Economist, December 29<sup>th</sup> 2021

### Recap:

Israel approved a plan to spend \$317 million on new homes and infrastructure in the Golan, with the goal of doubling its population to 100,000 by 2030. "I would like to be clear: after many static years regarding the scope of community life, our goal today is to double the population of the Golan Heights," Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said [1].

### The Context:

- ✧ The Golan is one of five territories captured by Israel during the six-day war in 1967. It handed the Sinai Peninsula back to Egypt after agreeing to a peace deal in 1978 and withdrew from the Gaza Strip in 2005. The final status of the West Bank and East Jerusalem has not yet been determined. Israel has long justified its position in the Golan, claiming self-defense, since Syria had used the high ground to shell Israeli farms in the Galilee below.
- ✧ In 1981 Israel annexed a large swath of the Golan and although secret land for peace negotiations with Syria resumed up until the late 90's, nothing ever materialized. Today, 52,000 people live in the area and the Golan remain a popular tourist destination and strategic military position.
- ✧ Most countries believe Israel's annexation of the Golan is illegal however Syria's decade-long civil war makes the alternative much less palatable [2]. In 2019, the US became the first country to recognize Israeli sovereignty in the Golan.
- ✧ Syrian President Bashar al Assad's regime denounced Israel saying, "Syria strongly condemns the Israeli settlement policies that rise to the level of war crimes [3]." Israel's Arab parties also condemned the move out of concern that annexation and further development, met with little international resistance, will set a precedent for the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

### Conversation Points:

- ✧ Would Bennet have initiated the annexation if America didn't bless Israel's presence in the area first?
- ✧ Should the Golan ever be given back to Syria and if so, under what conditions?

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## Palestinian Authority's Abbas Visits Israel's Gantz in Rare Trip

Al Jazeera, December 27<sup>th</sup> 2021

**Recap:**

Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas held talks with Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz during a rare visit to Israel.

**The Context:**

- ✧ Relations between Israel and the PA have soured over the years. Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu sidelined the issue during his tenure as prime minister and oversaw a steady expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. For Abbas' part, his government is widely seen as corrupt and authoritarian. A recent poll showed that support for Abbas, who took power in 2005 for a four-year term, has plummeted and Hamas, the ruling Palestinian faction in Gaza, would likely win elections in the West Bank if they were held today.
- ✧ In late August, Gantz visited the PA in Ramallah although Bennett insisted there was no peace process ongoing with the Palestinians. On Wednesday, Israel announced "confidence-building measures" with the PA including a \$32 million advance payment to the PA in taxes collected on its behalf by Israel [4]. Israel will also legalize 9,500 undocumented Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza [5].
- ✧ Critics were vocal on both sides of the spectrum. Hamas condemned the talks, saying the PA betrayed the "national spirit of the Palestinian people" while Israeli opposition party Likud criticized Gantz for making "concessions dangerous for Israel's security."

**Conversation Points:**

- ✧ Is Israel safer with a stronger or weaker PA? What would happen if Hamas took over the West Bank?
  - ✧ How can Bennett manage the wide range of opinions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within his coalition to ensure they remain united?
  - ✧ Why is the coalition putting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict back on the national agenda?
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## Chief Rabbi Lau Threatens to Stop Approving Conversions If Reform Passes

Tzvi Joffre, Jerusalem Post, December 29<sup>th</sup> 2021

**Recap:**

Israel's Chief Rabbi David Lau threatened to halt all conversions if the government proceeds with its planned conversion reform [6].

**The Context:**

- ✧ Converts to Judaism whose conversions are not recognized by the Chief Rabbinate cannot marry in Israel. Reform & Conservative conversions performed in Israel have not been recognized for years [7]. The reforms to Israel's conversion system, initiated by Israeli Religious Services Minister Matan Kahana, would allow city rabbis to operate conversion courts [8], thus decentralizing power from the Chief Rabbinate. 450,000 immigrants from the former Soviet Union and 30,000 Ethiopians who do not fit the Orthodox requirement of having a Jewish mother will benefit greatly from the reforms [9].
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- ✧ Responding to Lau's letter, Kahana expressed dismay saying, "the move will hurt new immigrants from Ethiopia, IDF soldiers seeking to convert, and thousands of other potential converts."
- ✧ Aryeh Deri, head of the Ultra-Orthodox Shas Party who was recently indicted for tax offenses, called the decision to stop approving conversions "correct and just", while Finance Minister Avigdor Liberman, himself a Jew of Soviet descent, called for Lau's immediate suspension [10].

**Conversation Points:**

- ✧ Should local Rabbis be involved in the conversion process?
  - ✧ Will decentralizing conversions create a halachic black hole?
  - ✧ What is the consequence of not allowing Israeli citizens of all Jewish beliefs and lineage the right to convert?
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**Notes:**

1. [Israel announces plan to double Golan Heights population, drawing condemnation from Syria](#), Nada Bashir, Hamdi Alkhshali and Jennifer Deaton, CNN, December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021
  2. [Syria condemns 'dangerous' Israeli plans to double Golan population](#), Times of Israel, December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021
  3. [Syria condemns Israel's plan to double Golan Heights settlements](#), Al Jazeera, December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021
  4. [Gantz announces series of gestures to Palestinians after meeting Abbas](#), AARON BOXERMAN and JACOB MAGID, Times of Israel, December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021
  5. Ibid.
  6. [Israel's chief rabbi warns he won't approve conversions if Conversion Authority head removed](#), HANAN GREENWOOD AND ARIEL KAHANA, JNS.org, December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021
  7. [Liberman issues warning to chief rabbi as Knesset vote on conversion reform delayed](#), Times of Israel, December 29, 2021
  8. [Israel's chief rabbi warns he won't approve conversions if Conversion Authority head removed](#), HANAN GREENWOOD AND ARIEL KAHANA, JNS.org, December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021
  9. [Liberman issues warning to chief rabbi as Knesset vote on conversion reform delayed](#), Times of Israel, December 29, 2021
  10. Ibid.
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**The Sabra Report** is a newsletter intended to stimulate conversation about Israel by recapping major events & providing context. Our conversation points are meant to encourage discussion amongst friends and family.

**The Sabra Report** is written by Irving Safdieh.

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