



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

March 12, 2018

Ha'aretz

Elections Back on Table as Lieberman Rejects Draft Bill Deal

Lawmakers from Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beitenu said Monday their party would vote against [the compromise reached Sunday night](#) between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the ultra-orthodox coalition parties regarding the [contentious haredi draft bill](#). The controversial bill lies at the center of a conflict between the ultra-orthodox parties and Lieberman's Yisrael Beitenu, which vehemently opposes the current draft. Both sides have threatened to disband the coalition if their demands regarding the bill are not met, which would prompt a snap election. Israel's next election is currently scheduled for November 2019. Yisrael Beitenu party whip MK Robert Ilatov, speaking on Israeli TV, said his party plans to vote against the compromise. "I think the bill should come from a professional source at the Defense Ministry," he said. See also, ["Political crisis over? All eyes on Liberman" \(Globes\)](#)

Ynet News

Ministerial Committee for Legislation Approves IDF Draft Bill

The new IDF draft bill accepted by the Hasidic Council of Torah Sages was approved by the Ministerial Committee for Legislation on Monday morning and will be sent to a preliminary Knesset reading Wednesday. One of the members of the ministerial committee, Minister Sofa Landver of the Yisrael Beytenu party, didn't show up for the vote but left a note stating her objection to the bill. It is still unclear how the Yisrael Beytenu faction will vote on Wednesday. Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman's party has said that its Knesset members, including Minister Landver, would vote against the law in its preliminary reading. A minister who votes against the coalition is summarily fired. See also, ["Netanyahu and ultra-Orthodox Coalition Partner Reach Compromise on Draft Bill" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Walla.co.il

AG Opposed to Draft Bill: Won't Withstand Court's Scrutiny

Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit is opposed to the wording of the draft bill that will be introduced today to the Ministerial Committee for Legislation for its approval. Walla News has learned that the attorney general believes that the bill in its current wording is unconstitutional and is unlikely to withstand the High Court of Justice's scrutiny since it fails to cite minimal target numbers for the draft of Haredi conscripts, and contains neither financial nor criminal sanctions in the event of failure to meet the draft target numbers.

Ma'ariv

Lapid: We Will Not Join Netanyahu If He is Indicted

"Yesh Atid will not join any government if the prime minister is indicted," Yesh Atid Chairman Yair Lapid made clear yesterday. Lapid said this after the chairman of his faction, MK Ofer Shelah, attended a weekend event two days ago and said: "The first thing they ask you in politics in Israel is who are you boycotting. The answer is no one. We want a government led by Yair Lapid with the major parties." His statements sparked a firestorm and fierce criticism from the Zionist Union and Meretz MKs. See also, ["Lapid slams door on possible coalition with post-indictment Netanyahu" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

State Prosecutor Implies Elections Won't Affect Decision on PM

With the Israeli political scene galloping toward a snap vote, State Prosecutor Shai Nitzan launched a fierce defense of the justice system on Sunday, warning Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that victory at the ballot box would not clear his name of serious corruption allegations. "The question of whether the public is convinced that a certain person is innocent of any crime or accusation certainly has importance in the public sphere," Nitzan told a joint Israel Democracy Institute and Makor Rishon conference in celebrating "70 Years of Israel's democracy. "But," he continued, "the decision to try someone and rule on their case is not decided by the opinion of the majority or a public referendum." Early elections seemed all but unavoidable on Sunday evening, after the spiritual leaders of a major ultra-Orthodox party rejected a compromise on a conscription bill that has roiled the coalition. See also, ["Nitzan to Netanyahu: Attacking state's witnesses as liars is baseless" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Jordan to Reportedly Approve New Israeli Ambassador

The Jordanian government is said to be set to approve the newly appointed Israeli ambassador to Amman, drawing to a close a diplomatic spat between the formerly friendly neighbors over a shooting incident in Israel's embassy that left two Jordanians dead. Jordanian newspaper Al Ghad reported on Sunday that Jordan is expected to accept Amir Weissbrod as Israel's new ambassador to Jordan. The former ambassador, Einat Schlein, was forced to step down in the wake of the crisis and the embassy was shut down. An investigation was opened after an Israeli security guard fired at an armed Jordanian citizen. Jordan said that on July 23, 17-year-old Mohammed Jawawdeh was shot dead by the head of security at Israel's embassy in Amman during a row over the late delivery of furniture. A second Jordanian man, Bashar Hamarneh, was killed by gunfire.

UNHRC Report: Settlements Are a War Crime

Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank and east Jerusalem is a war crime, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini charged in a report he issued last week. "The establishment and expansion of settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory by Israel, including the legal and administrative measures that it has taken to provide socioeconomic incentives, security, infrastructure and social services to citizens of Israel residing in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, amount to the transfer by Israel of its population into the Occupied Palestinian Territory," His report on Israeli settlement activity was published on the UNHCR website on Wednesday.

Senior Jerusalem Official Arrested in Corruption Affair

Police arrested six people Monday morning and detained another suspect for questioning on suspicions of bribery, fraud and breach of trust, abuse of power and tax offenses. One of the arrested suspects is a senior Jerusalem Municipality official who chairs an important committee and has been planning to run for a key position in the city. He was arrested along with a relative of his. Another suspect is a real estate entrepreneur who has held senior positions in the Israeli economy and was once nominated for the position of Finance Ministry director-general. He has been questioned in previous affairs as well.

Cooked and Served

By Nahum Barnea, columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth

- **Mordechai Stern, who serves as the Council of Torah Sages' secretary, doesn't have WhatsApp. He doesn't have internet at all, because according to Haredi Halacha, the internet is an abomination. He uses a fax machine for his correspondences. That might have met the pace of the previous century, but it has a hard time keeping up with the current one.**
- **Yesterday the diligent secretary issued a letter that rejected the compromise proposal on the draft bill in the name of the Council of Torah Sages. In other words, we're heading toward elections. But by the time that letter was approved, sent and published, Haredi interests were already in a different place. The Haredim no longer wanted elections. They wanted a compromise. Litzman, who started the entire uproar, rushed off to Netanyahu to explain to him that things weren't exactly as they seemed. Netanyahu didn't understand Litzman and Litzman didn't understand Netanyahu. The two parted ways in mutual misunderstanding.**
- **At the time that this column is being written, I don't know whether elections are going to be held and, if so, when. As the wise rabbis said long ago, prophecy was given to fools after the destruction of the Temple. The problem isn't with the prophecy; the problem is with the fools. It is very hard to prophesize to which lows they'll sink state affairs.**
- **Holding early elections isn't good for the Haredim. It is liable to push Shas beneath the electoral threshold, and without Shas, their ability to negotiate will be vastly diminished. Aryeh Deri, in his despair, will call on the voters to come and save him, and that is liable to hurt them at the ballot boxes. Most importantly, there is no guarantee that they will be part of the next coalition government. Netanyahu is preoccupied currently with just one issue—the investigations. If he thinks that a more centrist government will improve his standing vis-à-vis the State Attorney's Office, the media and/or the justice system—he won't hesitate to betray them. He did that once before, colluding with Livni and Lapid, and he never paid a price for that with the Haredim. There is nothing to stop him from doing that again. Another possibility is that someone else will be prime minister.**
- **This crisis erupted with the coalition partners jostling with one another to gain some ground. Netanyahu wanted to ensure that his term would last beyond the day the attorney general announces a decision to indict him. He believes that he will be better equipped to face his hearing and the court if he is prime minister.**
- **The Haredim wanted to pass a basic law into legislation that would perpetuate their preferential treatment, and a draft law that would exempt their sector from their military duty. Kahlon wanted a state budget that he could brag about to the voters. People who voted for him two years ago aren't going to vote for him again, and he is in desperate need of a new pool of voters, different from the ones who voted for him last time (he mainly received votes from the middle class, all of whom are potential Lapid voters. He hopes to get his new voters from traditionally right wing voters).**
- **Lieberman's voters have begun to disappear on him. That trend, which every immigrant party has undergone before his, is now happening to Yisrael Beiteinu as well—and has been**

compounded by the corruption trial against Faina Kirshenbaum and the absence of any achievements that can be bandied about. The best solution from his perspective is to return to the Likud. But the Likud leaders aren't particularly keen on having him right now. Netanyahu will campaign to win the support of the older immigrants from Russia—Lieberman's core supporters—and will cry: I'm the victim of the left wing establishment. Netanyahu will suck dry Lieberman's pool of voters. Lieberman didn't want elections, but understood that if he was going to be forced into them, he needs to be identified with a popular campaign. He went for the draft bill.

- What started out as an attempt to gain a bit more ground devolved into chaos. Netanyahu cooked this stew, Lieberman added the seasoning, Kahlon stirred the pot and Lieberman turned up the flame. Netanyahu, who was supposed to put out the fire early on, allowed it to go out of control. This isn't the first time that has happened to him.
- Elections should be held either when their allotted date arrives or if there is a genuine disagreement about government policy and/or performance. That isn't the case in the Netanyahu era. In 2015 he forced early elections on the country because of his freebie, and in 2018 he is facilitating elections because of his investigations. And those guys still have the gall to talk about governability.

SUMMARY: Holding early elections isn't good for the Haredim. It is liable to push Shas beneath the electoral threshold, and without Shas, their ability to negotiate will be vastly diminished. Aryeh Deri, in his despair, will call on the voters to come and save him, and that is liable to hurt them at the ballot boxes. Most importantly, there is no guarantee that they will be part of the next coalition government. Netanyahu is preoccupied currently with just one issue—the investigations. If he thinks that a more centrist government will improve his standing vis-à-vis the State Attorney's Office, the media and/or the justice system—he won't hesitate to betray them. He did that once before, colluding with Livni and Lapid, and he never paid a price for that with the Haredim. There is nothing to stop him from doing that again. Another possibility is that someone else will be prime minister. This crisis erupted with the coalition partners jostling with one another to gain some ground. Netanyahu wanted to ensure that his term would last beyond the day the attorney general announces a decision to indict him. He believes that he will be better equipped to face his hearing and the court if he is prime minister.

Two Vie for the Succession

By Ben Caspit, columnist at Ma'ariv

- **Two battles are being fought simultaneously: Binyamin Netanyahu's desperate battle of survival, on the one hand, and an equally desperate battle to succeed Netanyahu, on the other. The second battle is more interesting than the first: it is a battle between two men who want to climb to the top of the pyramid and who know that they can't do so unless they are part of the only governing party on the right, the Likud. They are Avigdor Lieberman and Naftali Bennett.**
- **Lieberman collaborated with Netanyahu and lit this huge bonfire in return for a promise that he would be defense minister after the next elections as well. I believe Lieberman's announcement that he intends to run in the next elections on his own, as the chairman of Yisrael Beiteinu. I don't believe that he hasn't fully coordinated his position with his partner of yore, Binyamin Netanyahu. They are completely coordinated with one another and I wouldn't be surprised if after the elections, when Netanyahu applies himself to the task of forming the next government, he not only appoints Lieberman defense minister but also helps him return to the Likud and appoints him deputy prime minister. That will be Lieberman's remuneration: he will be given the inheritance for the day after Netanyahu, if and when that happens. If that reminds you of anything, you're right: that is exactly what Ariel Sharon did to Netanyahu last time, on the eve of the 1999 defeat. However, in order for that to end in success for Lieberman, Netanyahu is going to have to keep his promise. Netanyahu's record on keeping promises isn't very impressive. That said, Lieberman knows how to collect a debt.**
- **Naftali Bennett, meanwhile, has been watching this from the sidelines and is up in arms. The prime minister just gave his rival, Lieberman, a significant advantage in the battle of succession, and is taking apart a government that Bennett has enjoyed serving in for the past three years for purely egotistic reasons. Bennett knows that there is never going to be a more right wing government than the current one. He, in cooperation with Ayelet Shaked, is in the midst of an impressive campaign to impose right wing governance—and all that is about to sink into the deep waters only because Netanyahu has gotten himself into hot water with the police. Bennett finds that maddening. He lost between three and five seats to Netanyahu in the cannibalizing campaign that Netanyahu staged before the 2015 elections, and he has displayed exceptional fealty to the prime minister ever since. He didn't take the government apart after the police recommendations to indict Netanyahu for bribery, and this is how he's being repaid? Bennett exploded yesterday at Netanyahu and said, for the first time, that he would run for prime minister against Netanyahu if he were to drag the country to elections prematurely.**
- **Bennett's threat to run for prime minister isn't serious, but the last thing that Netanyahu needs now is Bennett and Ayelet Shaked on the warpath against him. Add into the mix Moshe Kahlon, who has neither forgiven nor forgotten, and everyone on the other side of the political aisle—and you'll see that Netanyahu's gamble to hold elections against the entire world and 119 MKs is liable to end badly. On the other hand, Netanyahu has nothing to lose. Three of his closest and most connected former confidants have already turned state's witness, and there may be more. In order to survive he is going to have to burn down the entire clubhouse. That's precisely what he is doing.**

- **Sitting inside that clubhouse, aside from the citizens of Israel, are also 119 MKs who really don't want to be forced to contend with elections. A lot of them are not going to be reelected to the next Knesset. They have held their tongues despite that. Senior Likud officials have gone underground. People who aspire to take the mantle, such as Yisrael Katz, Gilad Erdan and Gidon Saar (who is waiting in the wings), have chosen not to speak and have evaporated. They understand that the prime minister is willing to give up a successful and homogenous right wing coalition only so as to allow him to continue his war to the death against the law enforcement agencies, but none of them has had the courage to speak out. This is a destructive populist tsunami that is liable to annihilate the last vestiges of Israeli stateliness. That is the real danger that Binyamin Netanyahu poses to the State of Israel.**

SUMMARY: Two battles are being fought simultaneously: Binyamin Netanyahu's desperate battle of survival, on the one hand, and an equally desperate battle to succeed Netanyahu, on the other. The second battle is more interesting than the first: it is a battle between two men who want to climb to the top of the pyramid and who know that they can't do so unless they are part of the only governing party on the right, the Likud. They are Avigdor Lieberman and Naftali Bennett.