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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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March 4, 2019

Times of Israel

Poll: Two-Thirds of Israelis Say PM Should Resign if Indicted

Two-thirds of Israelis believe that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should resign if he is indicted for corruption, a survey indicated Friday, a day after Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit announced that Netanyahu will be charged with criminal wrongdoing, pending a hearing. The findings also indicated that Netanyahu could be unable to form a governing coalition after the April 9 elections. The poll found that 36% of Israelis believe that Netanyahu should resign now. A further 32% think he should step down if he is actually indicted after the completion of the hearing process.

Ha'aretz

Coalition Parties Reaffirm Netanyahu Endorsement

Despite Mandelblit's announcement, all of the coalition parties - Kulanu, Hayamin Hehadash, Yisrael Beiteinu, Shas, United Torah Judaism and the far-right parties - all said they would join another Netanyahu-led government. Blue White, Labor, Meretz, and Arab parties Hadash, Ta'al, United Arab List and Balad said they would not join any Netanyahu-led government.

Times of Israel

Blue and White Said to Oppose Evacuating Settlement Blocs

The Blue and White party will oppose the division of Jerusalem as part of any peace agreement with the Palestinians and will call for Israel to maintain sovereignty over West Bank settlement blocs, according to an Israeli television report on Sunday. Blue and White was formed last month in a merger between former military chief Benny Gantz's party and Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid. While Gantz has signaled his willingness to engage in peace talks, he has provided few specifics.

Times of Israel

Likud MK Begin Blasts PM for Attacking Law Enforcement

After Netanyahu attacked Mandelblit and other legal officials, alleging a politically motivated "witch hunt," Likud MK Benny Begin on Sunday said that he was "deeply troubled" by the allegations against the prime minister. "It was very difficult for me to read," said Begin, a Likud veteran and the son of former prime minister Menachem Begin. He has decided not to run for a spot in the next Knesset. "The remarks against the attorney general are very grave and baseless."

Reuters

US Consulate for Palestinians Closing Monday

The US consulate in Jerusalem, which serves Palestinians, will be absorbed into the new US Embassy to Israel on Monday, the State Department said, a planned merger that has angered Palestinian leadership. The decision to create a single diplomatic mission in Jerusalem was announced last October by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. The planned merger has raised Palestinians' fears that the Trump administration is downgrading the handling of their concerns. Palestinian leaders suspended diplomatic contacts with the Trump administration after the embassy move and have accused Washington of pro-Israel bias.

The New York Times

Israelis Imagine Future Without Netanyahu

Following last week's announcement, Israelis are starting to ask whether Israel can not only survive, but thrive, without the man who has come to dominate their national self-image. "I would rather have a dishonest but strong leader than an honest but clueless leader," said Negin Abramov of Rehovot. "He is the one holding this country up." "Even people who hate him, when they close their eyes, they can't imagine anyone else sitting in his office," said Micah Goodman, a Jerusalem-based scholar and author of "Catch-67," on the conundrums of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Jerusalem Post

Netanyahu Orders Home Demolition After Ramming Attack

Israel will do everything it can to expedite the demolition of the homes of the terrorists responsible for the ramming attack on IDF soldiers early Monday morning, Netanyahu said at the start of a meeting with the prime minister of Samoa. "This morning the IDF soldiers acted swiftly and killed the terrorists who threatened to run them over," Netanyahu said. One IDF officer was seriously wounded and a Border Police soldier was lightly hurt after a car struck them during an arrest operation in the West Bank. Forces opened fire on the vehicle's three occupants, killing two of them and wounding the third, who was arrested.

Times of Israel

Israel Bans Senior Islamic Cleric from Entering Aqsa Mosque

Israel has banned several Islamic officials appointed by Jordan from entering the Temple Mount in Jerusalem following clashes between Palestinian worshipers and Israeli police in recent weeks. Abdel Azem Salhab, the highest-ranking official in the Waqf, the Jordanian-run council that oversees the site, said Israeli police handed him and two other Palestinian officials the order on Sunday. The site, the Jews' holiest, is referred to as the Noble Sanctuary by Muslims, who consider it the third-holiest place in Islam.

PM's Dilemma: Catching Gantz May Cost Him Majority

By Amnon Harari, Senior Columnist

- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu can be pleased with the opinion polls over the weekend, which show his Likud party retaining a similar number of seats in the run-up to the April 9 Knesset election as the polls projected the weekend before. But it's worth considering the following:
 1. It's hard to imagine that some of the recent polling results could be greeted warmly by both Netanyahu and his main contender, Kahol Lavan leader Benny Gantz, but that's the sense from polls by the major television channels in the wake of Thursday's announcement by Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit that he intends to indict the prime minister, subject to a pre-indictment hearing. Ostensibly, it's Gantz who should be most pleased. Instant polls conducted after his Hosen L'Yisrael party and Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid announced that they had formed their joint Kahol Lavan slate gave the slate 35 to 36 Knesset seats, significantly more than Likud. Yet Gantz may be benefitting from a temporary surge following the excitement over the new joint slate and we also need to recognize the problematic nature of results of some of the hastily conducted polling.
- And when one adds to that the vague account about an alleged act of sexual impropriety on Gantz's part when he was a teenager — which he denies — one can understand why Gantz's campaign would be pleased if his slate's projected haul of Knesset seats has remained stable or has even increased a bit. And in the wake of the draft indictment of Netanyahu, with the polls currently show it would likely be impossible for Netanyahu to form a majority coalition, Gantz should be all the more pleased. Yet it's Netanyahu who is smiling, even though weekend polls project that a coalition of his Likud and the other parties that would be part of his next government lack a majority. True, that's a dangerous situation for him to be in, but ultimately, Likud is still projected to get 29 or 30 seats, similar numbers to last week, and the right-wing bloc as a whole has only lost a seat or two.
- Fears of a doomsday scenario following the announcement of Mendelblit's draft indictment — with an anticipated loss of five seats (as Likud predicted) or double that (as the opposition predicted) — turned out to be baseless. Only a small percentage of voters shifted their support from Likud to other parties (and just a few percent shifted to the center-left bloc). And even if it was more than that, others shifted back to Netanyahu's Likud instead of supporting the small right-wing parties. As with the formation of Kahol Lavan, the most significant response on the voters' part to the draft indictment will be seen right away. The further we get from it, the more that the rather minor harm it caused with heal itself. That is, assuming that damning evidence against the prime minister is not leaked. On the other hand, even if the immediate damage is repaired, we'll go back to the difficult situation into which the polls had place Netanyahu last week, which isn't a source of great pleasure for him either.

- 2. The most dramatic result of the polls, as on-air commentators noted, is the shift in the strength of the party blocs: from a slight 61 to 59 advantage for the right-wing to an identical lead at the moment for the left. Commentators have conceded that the change is of limited importance: an anti-Netanyahu bloc of such a scope does not portend a Gantz-led government at this point. But the shift was mainly the result of smaller right-wing parties dropping below the 3.25 percent threshold, although some of them are close to it. And just one small polling error with the blocs neck-and-neck could scramble the deck. We shouldn't jump to conclusions from a single weekend of such close results.
- It's particularly ironic that Avigdor Lieberman, who pushed through the higher electoral threshold with the nearly acknowledged goal of keeping the Arab-majority parties out of the Knesset, might find his own party as its main victim. Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu doesn't make it above the threshold in any of the weekend polls. It is polling at 2 percent of the vote. Its support has apparently gone to Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon's Kulanu party, which rallied a bit, and perhaps also to the party of an accused (or persecuted) prime minister, in his hour of need. Likud suffered a slight decline, meaning that a small slice of its support went to Gantz's Kahol Lavan and Kulanu.
- At around the 2 percent level of support along with Lieberman is Orli Levi-Abekasis of Gesher party, who began the current Knesset term as a member of Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu and then split off as an independent. When she first announced she would be running on her own in the upcoming election, polls initially predicted that she would garner seven or eight seats. But the current focus on Netanyahu and Gantz has left her out in the cold. The next week or two will be critical for Levi-Abekasis and Lieberman. At the moment, she doesn't have enough votes to push her over the electoral threshold, but her Gesher party is running at between 2.5 and 3 percent according to the polls, which puts her relatively close to the 3.25 percent that she would need for representation. Yisrael Beiteinu is trailing her slightly.
- History has demonstrated that once people repeatedly see that polling results show a party falling under the threshold, as the election approaches, they become less loyal to such small parties. They prefer to go for a party for which a vote will count. In the 2013 Knesset election, the Am Shalem party suffered such a sorry fate and the Green party had the same thing happen in 2009. By Election Day they were forgotten. The outcome in this regard is critical on April 9 for Levi-Abekasis and Lieberman and also for Netanyahu and Gantz, when it comes to their potential coalition partners.
- 3. Lieberman's situation also symbolizes Netanyahu's difficulty in developing a strategy that will have him pull ahead. If Netanyahu wishes to close the growing gap with Gantz – who, if he maintains his strength will be able to provide grounds for Kahlon or the ultra-Orthodox parties to move over to his bloc, on the argument that the people have spoken – the prime minister should seek to pick up additional seats without reducing the right-wing bloc as a whole. Unfortunately, for him, however, the weekend polls show that these two goals might be mutually exclusive. Those polls show Netanyahu's coalition partners getting between zero and seven seats,

meaning that they don't have votes to spare that might shift to Likud without endangering their own futures. That could leave Netanyahu facing a devastating dilemma: If he refrains from wooing voters supporting his coalition partners, he might have fewer seats than Kahol Lavan and that might cause his partners to wonder whether they should remain permanently wedded to Likud.

- If Netanyahu manages to raise Likud's result to around the 36 or 37 that Gantz's Kahol Lavan is currently drawing, it means that almost necessarily one of Likud's smaller coalition partners would disappear and the right-wing bloc would lose its majority. Of course, that could also happen on the other side of the spectrum too. If Gantz continues to increase his strength, it could put the smaller left-wing parties at risk and harm Gantz's chances that he would have a bloc of support that would make it impossible for Netanyahu to form a government. That's why both Kahol Lavan and Likud, the two large parties in the polls, will focus on attacking one another. If they don't want to hurt their own blocs, the only votes they would want to court would be from their rival large party.

Hamas is Avoiding Escalation, But That Could Change

By Avi Issacharoff, Senior Columnist

- Fifty-two point one percent. That is the current unemployment rate in the Gaza Strip. Every second adult is unemployed. Among the young, educated population, the rate is even more striking: over 70%. The numbers are almost incomprehensible. Gaza's economy is stuck and has no growth stimuli. Residents may have more hours of electricity per day than in the past — eight — but their future is looking dimmer than ever. If anyone is wondering why we have been seeing another increase over the last two weeks in so-called “popular terrorism” — incendiary balloons, improvised explosives, etc. — the Strip's economy can supply a sad but sufficient explanation.
- And that is just the beginning. At the end of the month Palestinians will be marking “Land Day,” a year since the tactic of mass demonstrations on the border was first implemented. And if until recently it seemed like the Hamas terror group and its leader Yahya Sinwar had an achievement or two to show for it — notably the \$15 million monthly cash transfer from Qatar that enabled salary payments to Hamas employees — that has now vanished. Hamas doesn't seem to be planning a major escalation of tensions, at least until the end of the month. It is using the weekly Friday protests and other activities as a means of letting off steam. Gazans have been increasingly critical of Hamas over the halt in salary payments and the lack of response to the recent killing of three teenagers by IDF forces during border riots.
- Instead of being dragged into an all-out war, Hamas has opted for increasing the daily tensions with Israel. But when the organization speaks about a “million-man march,” it is clear that March 30 will bring something different. And in the Gaza pressure cooker, in which the young generation has no hope, it is likely we will find many of them near the fence, with Hamas's encouragement. The terror group, which has ruled the Strip since taking over by force in 2007 and openly seeks Israel's destruction, is currently dealing with a tough financial challenge. Its decision to reject the Qatari cash payments, transferred with the consent of the Israeli government, has necessitated a reevaluation.
- Suddenly, the movement's spokesman is seeking donations in Bitcoin. Its Al-Quds TV network has closed down. And it is taking steps it refrained from in the past, such as taking over the Kerem Shalom border crossing with Israel and expelling all Palestinian Authority staff. With that, Hamas has risked Israel closing the crossing. But since Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government is trying to preserve any sort of status quo with Hamas, Israel has agreed to cooperate with staffers paid by the terror group, and the crossing — the only one for goods entering Gaza — is continuing to operate normally.
- In case anyone was wondering, the taxes currently collected on the Palestinian side for the goods passing through Kerem Shalom are going to Hamas. In other words, the movement did a

simple trick: refusing the cash if it requires an Israeli approval, but asking for Israeli approval for keeping the crossing functional, where it will anyway receive the money it wants. Hamas's bold move at Kerem Shalom stems from another point: that reconciliation chances with the PA these days are close to zero.

- Hamas's politburo leader Ismail Haniyeh has spent the last two weeks in Cairo. He returned with four Hamas members who had been held in Egyptian jail for years after they were captured in Egyptian Rafah on their way to a training camp in Iran. Haniyeh also discussed a series of steps that would stabilize the situation versus Egypt and versus Israel. For now, it's clear to both Hamas and Egypt that Israel, before the April 9 elections, will not agree to any dramatic step that could harm Netanyahu's chances of being reelected as prime minister. But public pressure is having an effect in Gaza; hence the spike in violence. How will it look at the end of the month, with the planned Land Day protest? That is hard to predict.