



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Monday, April 15

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 - By Ben Caspit, columnist at Al Monitor

News Excerpts

April 15, 2019

Jerusalem Post

'Deal of the Century' Won't Include Palestinian Statehood-Report

The Trump administration's peace plan, known as the "Deal of the Century" will reportedly include "practical proposals" for improving the lives of Palestinians, but it will probably stop short of the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state alongside Israel, The Washington Post reported Monday night. The "Deal of the Century" is expected to be published soon following more than two years in which it was formulated by a small group of US President Donald Trump's special envoys, which includes Jason Greenblatt and Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner. According to The Washington Post report, comments from Kushner and other US officials suggest that "the plan does away with statehood as the starting premise of peace efforts" as was the case over the last 20 years or so. See also, ["Trump peace package for Middle East likely to stop short of Palestinian Statehood \(Washington Post\)](#)

I24 News

Former EU Leaders Urge EU to Reject Trump Plan if no Pal' State

Some three dozen senior former European politicians published a call on Sunday for the European Union to reaffirm its commitment to a two-state solution for Israel and the Palestinians and reject any Trump peace plan that does not address Palestinian demands. The letter, published in the UK's Guardian newspaper, comes with the White House expected to soon publish its long-awaited plan and following an election promise made by PM Netanyahu to effectively annex West Bank settlements. The letter, signed by several former prime ministers and foreign ministers, said the EU must continue to insist on "a Palestinian state alongside Israel on borders based on the pre-1967 lines with mutually agreed." See also, ["Europe must stand by the two-state solution for Israel and Palestine" \(Guardian\)](#)

Reuters

Israeli Delegation Cancels Visit to Bahrain after Outcry

A delegation from Israel that was due to attend a conference in Bahrain this week has pulled out due to security concerns, the organizers said on Sunday, after Bahrainis held an extensive campaign against the visit. A spokeswoman for Israel's Economy Minister Eli Cohen said his planned visit to Bahrain this week had been "delayed because of political issues". Another Israeli cabinet minister said this referred to coalition talks after Israel's election last week. Israel and the Gulf Arab countries are in the midst of a diplomatic push aimed at forging an alliance against their common enemy Iran. See also, ["Israeli delegation cancels visit to Bahrain after outcry" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Security Prisoners Report Progress in Negotiations With Israel

Talks between Palestinian security inmates and the Israel Prison Service over the ongoing hunger strike the prisoners declared have progressed in the past few days, sources among the prisoners said Sunday. The prison service has not confirmed this, and said that while Palestinians claim that around 400 prisoners are striking, only 100 have been designated as "refusing meals," but are not maintaining a full hunger strike. According to the prison service, although the Hamas-led strike entered its seventh day on Sunday, only two prisoners in the Ohalei Kedar Prison have required medical care, indicating that the strike might not be complete.

Times of Israel

Rivlin will Start Consultations with Party Representatives Today

President Reuven Rivlin will begin hosting party leaders on Monday for consultations on forming a government, but his associates admitted that his ability to influence the makeup of the coalition is limited. Sixty MKs from five right-wing and haredi (ultra-Orthodox) factions have already committed to support Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu forming the government. The only question surrounds Yisrael Beytenu leader Avigdor Liberman, who will reveal his demands for the support of his party's five MKs in a meeting of party activists in Jerusalem on Monday night. "There is no real room for maneuvering," a source close to Rivlin said. "We have done the math, so I find it hard to imagine something will be different – unless there ends up being a big surprise." See also, ["Publicly grilling MKs over who'll be PM, Rivlin will expose gov't sausage-making" \(TOI\)](#)

Times of Israel

Gantz: Next Govt' will Distance Country from Law and Democracy

Blue and White party leader Benny Gantz all but ruled out sitting in a Benjamin Netanyahu-led government, saying Sunday that the PM would likely put together a coalition aimed at safeguarding him from prosecution on corruption charges. Speaking in a TV interview that aired days after leading his party to 35 seats, but without a path to form a coalition, Gantz was asked to categorically state that he would not sit with Netanyahu amid rumors Blue and White were looking to forge a secular unity government with Likud. "As I see it, Netanyahu is going to put together a coalition that will be busy with fortifying his legal position and in the end will distance Israel from law and democracy," Gantz told Channel 12's "Uvda" investigative news program, referring to the indictments Netanyahu faces. See also, ["Gantz: I'll be prime minister" \(Arutz 7\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

After Election Flop, Meretz and Labor Consider Merger

The Labor Party and Meretz have been examining the possibility of a merger, with the addition of candidates from Arab parties, following a bruising election that has halved their representation in the Knesset. No concrete proposals have been put forward yet but lawmakers in both parties may advance such a step in the near future. Arab-majority Hadash rejected calls to join forces "with Meretz or anyone else" for now, arguing that with the six Knesset seats its joined slate with Ta'al gained, it is "the leading and biggest party among the Arab public." Some Labor representatives also expressed reservations about a possible merger. See also, ["Yachimovich: Labor could unite with Meretz" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Times of Israel

Kahn: "Bereshit 2 Begins Now, our Flag will Be on the Moon"

After the failure of the lunar landing of the Israeli space probe Bereshit on Thursday, SpacelL President Morris Kahn announced on Saturday that he was launching the Bereshit 2 project, as of now, adding, "We have started something, we need the finish. We will put our flag on the moon. The small space probe, the world's first private moon landing device, crashed on the moon Thursday night while landing, apparently due to a loss of communication with its main engine. the approach of the lunar surface. Speaking on a famous program of the Twelfth Channel, South African billionaire Morris Kahn said the work around Bereshit version two would begin on Sunday. "The reactions have been fantastic. We have received an impressive amount of thanks and letters," he said. See also, ["Israel Announces Construction of 2nd Spacecraft" \(JOL\)](#)

Europe Must Stand by the Two-State Solution for Israel and Palestine

By High-ranking former European politicians

- **We are reaching out at a critical point in time in the Middle East, as well as in Europe. The EU is heavily invested in the multilateral, rules-based international order. International law has brought us the longest period of peace, prosperity and stability our continent has ever enjoyed. For decades, we have worked to see our Israeli and Palestinian neighbours enjoy the peace dividends that we Europeans have through our commitment to that order.**
- **In partnership with previous US administrations, Europe has promoted a just resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the context of a two-state solution. To this date, despite subsequent setbacks, the Oslo agreement is still a milestone of transatlantic foreign policy cooperation.**
- **Unfortunately, the current US administration has departed from longstanding US policy and distanced itself from established international legal norms. It has so far recognised only one side's claims to Jerusalem and demonstrated a disturbing indifference to Israeli settlement expansion. The US has suspended funding for the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) and for other programmes benefitting Palestinians – gambling with the security and stability of various countries located at Europe's doorstep.**
- **Against this unfortunate absence of a clear-cut commitment to the vision of two states, the Trump administration has declared itself close to finalising and presenting a new plan for Israeli-Palestinian peace. Despite uncertainty as to if and when the plan will be released, it is crucial for Europe to be vigilant and act strategically.**
- **We believe that Europe should embrace and promote a plan that respects the basic principles of international law as reflected in the agreed EU parameters for a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These parameters, which the EU has systematically reaffirmed during past US-sponsored talks, reflect our shared understanding that a viable peace requires the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel on borders based on the pre-1967 lines with mutually agreed, minimal and equal land swaps; with Jerusalem as the capital for both states; with security arrangements that address legitimate concerns and respect the sovereignty of each side and with an agreed, fair solution to the question of Palestine refugees.**
- **Europe, by contrast, should reject any plan that does not meet this standard. While sharing Washington's frustrations about the unsuccessful peace efforts of the past, we are convinced that a plan that reduces Palestinian statehood to an entity devoid of sovereignty, territorial contiguity and economic viability would severely compound the failure of previous peace-making efforts, accelerate the demise of the two-state option and fatally damage the cause of a durable peace for Palestinians and Israelis alike.**
- **It is, of course, preferable for Europe to be working in tandem with the US to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as to address other global issues in a strong, transatlantic alliance. However, in situations in which our vital interests and fundamental values are at stake, Europe must pursue its own course of action.**

- In anticipation of this US plan, we believe Europe should formally reaffirm the internationally agreed parameters for a two-state solution. Doing this in advance of the US plan establishes the EU's criteria for supporting American efforts and facilitates a coherent and unified European response once the plan is published.
- European governments should further commit to scale up efforts to protect the viability of a future two-state outcome. It is of the utmost importance that the EU and all member states actively ensure the implementation of relevant UN security council resolutions – including consistent differentiation in accordance with UN security council resolution 2334, between Israel in its recognised and legitimate borders, and its illegal settlements in the occupied territories.
- Furthermore, recent escalating efforts to restrict the unhindered work of civil society have made European support for human-rights defenders in both Israel and Palestine, and their critical role in reaching a sustainable peace, more important than ever.
- Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories are sliding into a one-state reality of unequal rights. This cannot continue. For the Israelis, for the Palestinians or for us in Europe. Right now, Europe is facing a defining opportunity to reinforce our shared principles and long-held commitments in relation to the Middle East peace process and thereby manifest Europe's unique role as a point of reference for a rules-based global order. Failing to seize this opportunity, at a point in time when this order is unprecedentedly challenged, would have far-reaching negative consequences.

Douglas Alexander *Former minister of state for Europe, United Kingdom*

Jean-Marc Ayrault *Former foreign minister and prime minister, France*

Carl Bildt *Former foreign minister and prime minister, Sweden*

Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz *Former foreign minister and prime minister, Poland*

Dacian Cioloș *Former prime minister and European commissioner, Romania*

Willy Claes *Former foreign minister and Nato secretary general, Belgium*

Massimo d'Alema *Former foreign minister and prime minister, Italy*

Karel De Gucht *Former foreign minister and European commissioner, Belgium*

Uffe Ellemann-Jensen *Former foreign minister and president of the European Liberals, Denmark*

Benita Ferrero-Waldner *Former foreign minister and European commissioner for external relations, Austria*

Franco Frattini *Former foreign minister and European commissioner, Italy*

Sigmar Gabriel *Former foreign minister and vice-chancellor, Germany*

Lena Hjelm-Wallén *Former foreign minister and deputy prime minister, Sweden*

Eduard Kukan *Former foreign minister, Slovakia*

Martin Lidegaard *Former foreign minister, Denmark*

Mogens Lykketoft *Former foreign minister and UN general assembly president, Denmark*

Louis Michel *Former foreign minister and European commissioner, Belgium*

David Miliband *Former foreign secretary, United Kingdom*

Holger K Nielsen *Former foreign minister, Denmark*

Marc Otte *Former EU special representative to the Middle East peace process, Belgium*

Ana Palacio *Former foreign minister, Spain*

Jacques Poos *Former foreign minister, Luxembourg*

Vesna Pusić *Former foreign minister and deputy prime minister, Croatia*

Mary Robinson *Former president and [United Nations](#) high commissioner for human rights,*

Ireland

Robert Serry *Former UN special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, the Netherlands*

Javier Solana *Former foreign minister, Nato secretary general and EU high representative for common foreign and security policy, Spain*

Per Stig Møller *Former foreign minister, Denmark*

Michael Spindelegger *Former foreign minister and vice-chancellor, Austria*

Jack Straw *Former foreign secretary, United Kingdom*

Desmond Swayne *Former minister of state for international development, United Kingdom*

Erkki Tuomioja *Former foreign minister, Finland*

Ivo Vajgl *Former foreign minister, Slovenia*

Frank Vandenbroucke *Former foreign minister, Belgium*

Jozias van Aartsen *Former foreign minister, the Netherlands*

Hubert Védrine *Former foreign minister, France*

Guy Verhofstadt *Former prime minister, Belgium*

Lubomír Zaorálek *Former foreign minister, Czech Republic*

SUMMARY: We believe that Europe should embrace and promote a plan that respects the basic principles of international law as reflected in the agreed EU parameters for a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These parameters, which the EU has systematically reaffirmed during past US-sponsored talks, reflect our shared understanding that a viable peace requires the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel on borders based on the pre-1967 lines with mutually agreed, minimal and equal land swaps; with Jerusalem as the capital for both states; with security arrangements that address legitimate concerns and respect the sovereignty of each side and with an agreed, fair solution to the question of Palestine refugees.

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Is Blue and White Strong Enough for Life in Opposition?

By Ben Caspit, columnist at AI Monitor

- Optimists in the Blue and White Party predicted during the election campaign that winning 34 to 35 seats in the 120-member Knesset would be a political watershed. Any figure above the target, said the strategists of the newly minted party established to unseat Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, would guarantee them power.
- On April 9, it turned out they had met their optimistic target but lost the fight. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud won the same number of votes for his Likud party, but is better positioned to form a government due to the strong showing of the right-wing bloc and its numerical advantage over the left and center-left. On April 11, after the final results were published, the Likud got one extra Knesset seat, reaching 36 mandates.
- In fact, Netanyahu has devoured the right, wiped out his nemesis Naftali Bennett of the New Right Party, eliminated the outcast Zehut Party of Moshe Feiglin that had been a thorn in his side and managed to contain the ultra-right United Right Party, still leaving him sufficient partners with whom to form a stable government, his fifth. On the other hand, Lt. Gen. (res.) Benny Gantz and his Blue and White co-chair Yair Lapid brought Labor to a historic low by pirating its voters, leaving them with very few significant partners with whom to form a government. The fact that Israel's Arab parties are not considered viable partners by the center-left and are not players in the coalition maneuvering makes the task of this political bloc virtually impossible.
- What happens now? Blue and White was established on the fly to achieve a single goal: bringing down Netanyahu. It is led by a quartet consisting of former military chief Gantz, who hooked up with another former chief of staff, Lt. Gen. (res.) Moshe Ya'alon, who had formed the Telem Party. The two then joined forces with Lapid and drew in a third former military chief, Lt. Gen. (res.) Gabi Ashkenazi. It all happened within two weeks and two and a half months prior to election day. This patchwork creation is composed of representatives from the political right and left, social activists and additional generals (two former major generals, two police commissioners, a former deputy head of the Shin Bet agency and a former deputy Mossad chief). The quartet runs this strange hybrid from what has been dubbed "the cockpit," with Gantz at the controls and the other three as co-pilots. Whether this strange creature can survive in Israel's political jungle and opposition exile is unclear.
- In 2005, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon formed a similar party, Kadima. Netanyahu sought repeatedly to dismantle Kadima and cannibalize it for his Likud, but failed. Kadima nonetheless disintegrated less than a decade later. Is there sufficient glue within Blue and White to ensure its survival and ability to challenge the next Netanyahu government from the benches of the Knesset opposition? "It all depends on what the interests are," a senior party figure told AI-Monitor on condition of anonymity. "It all depends on the alternatives. Right now, we are united behind one goal and none of us has other options. We are here to stay."
- Let's start with Lapid. This is his third election campaign. If he bows out now, so soon after aligning himself with Gantz and company, he will lose the political capital he has accumulated

and Yesh Atid will become a niche party devoid of real prospects. Lapid has to stay the course. The same goes for Gantz. He has no political experience and has no reason to give up after winning 35 Knesset seats in his first ever run for office. Ya'alon made the best deal in aligning his tiny Telem, which has no electoral base, with Gantz and Lapid and turning himself into a significant political force. He is not going anywhere, either, nor is the charismatic and popular Ashkenazi, who has told associates that Blue and White intends to provide an alternative to Netanyahu, protect Israel's democracy and keep going.

- Netanyahu's possible indictment in three cases of suspected corruption makes any talk of a Likud-Blue and White unity government irrelevant. Even if some magical formula can be found to make it possible, such a government would fall apart once Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit makes his final decision to indict Netanyahu, expected by the end of the year. Would anyone bother forming a unity government for eight months? Probably not.
- The only one who could reshuffle the cards is US President Donald Trump with his impending "deal of the century" for Israeli-Palestinian peace. The Washington rumor mill suggests its unveiling is near. Are Trump and Netanyahu coordinating? Might the US president bring to bear his considerable weight to convince Gantz, Lapid and their fellows to help Netanyahu make history? The prospects of such a scenario are slim to nil.
- Right now, the guys over at Blue and White are high on motivation and good intentions. "We have almost half the people behind us," another senior party source told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity. "People who voted for us and view us as their last hope, the final barrier to the destruction of Israeli democracy. We cannot disappoint them."
- Blue and White's game plan is to operate like a disciplined military unit and try to "make life miserable" for Netanyahu, as Lapid announced on April 10. There is, however, a world of difference — or more precisely, a wide and dangerous expanse of desert — between the military discipline ingrained in the party heads and the rest of the political arena. Most of the party's new Knesset members are political novices clueless about political work, and they may be deeply disappointed to realize that life in the opposition is hard and unrewarding most of the time. Not all are likely to survive the adventure.
- Meanwhile, Netanyahu has been busy. He is trying to engineer a blitz to bring Kahlon and his small Kulanu Party back into the fold of the Likud. Also on his agenda is a bid to dismantle the United Right alliance and pull its less radical wing led by Rabbi Rafi Peretz (HaBayit HaYehudi) into a mega-Likud comprised of over 40 Knesset members. It would hand him ultimate control of state affairs with the support of the disciplined, obedient 15 Knesset members of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties and make the task of the Blue and White opposition tougher than ever.
- Blue and White has set itself a target of undermining Netanyahu's legitimacy. "It is inconceivable," one of the party's putative Knesset members told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity, "for half the people of Israel to ignore the fact that we have a prime minister under suspicion in three criminal cases who will soon be indicted for bribery. The existence of Blue and White, a party with tremendous electoral backing and broad support, provides a real alternative to Netanyahu's corrupt regime."
- The party is now waiting for the evidentiary material and testimony against Netanyahu, expected to leak out once Mandelblit hands it over to the prime minister's legal team. Senior party officials are hoping the material will highlight the extent of government corruption under his aegis. "We

have to lead a broad public protest against the phenomenon of corruption in general and by Netanyahu in particular,” one party member told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity. “We have to take control of the public discourse and the street, to display our presence and set the agenda. We must not give Netanyahu a chance to evade this truth contained in the hundreds of binders of investigation material. This will be our test and this will be our mission.”

- This determination will come up against one of the most skilled politicians in Israeli history. Netanyahu proved during the recent campaign that he is still going strong and that he can deconstruct and reconstruct any agenda. On the other hand, Blue and White has finally provided a counterbalance. We are witnessing a heavyweight fight between two almost equal forces that has just begun.

SUMMARY: Blue and White’s game plan is to operate like a disciplined military unit and try to “make life miserable” for Netanyahu, as Lapid announced on April 10. There is, however, a world of difference — or more precisely, a wide and dangerous expanse of desert — between the military discipline ingrained in the party heads and the rest of the political arena. Most of the party’s new Knesset members are political novices clueless about political work, and they may be deeply disappointed to realize that life in the opposition is hard and unrewarding most of the time. Not all are likely to survive the adventure. Meanwhile, Netanyahu has been busy. He is trying to engineer a blitz to bring Kahlon and his small Kulanu Party back into the fold of the Likud. Also on his agenda is a bid to dismantle the United Right alliance and pull its less radical wing led by Rabbi Rafi Peretz (HaBayit HaYehudi) into a mega-Likud comprised of over 40 Knesset members. It would hand him ultimate control of state affairs with the support of the disciplined, obedient 15 Knesset members of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties and make the task of the Blue and White opposition tougher than ever.