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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Wednesday, April 3

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News Excerpts

April 3, 2019

Ynet News

Netanyahu to Meet Putin in Moscow on Thursday

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will fly to Moscow on Thursday to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Israeli leader's office said on Tuesday. The statement did not elaborate on the intended topics of discussion. The two leaders will meet five days before Israel's April 9 election in which the right-wing Netanyahu faces a strong challenge from a centrist candidate. On Monday, Netanyahu told reporters he and Putin spoke by telephone about Syria, whose Russian-backed president, Bashar Assad, has been gaining ground in an eight-year civil war. Israel worries Assad's Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah reinforcements could set up bases to attack it from Syria, and has carried out scores of air strikes against them. See also, ["Netanyahu to meet Putin in Moscow on Thursday" \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

i24 News

Gantz: Israel's Democracy is in Danger

Leader of Blue & White, Benny Gantz, on Tuesday accused PM Netanyahu of attacking everyone around him while putting Israel's democracy in danger. Speaking at a Time of Israel event in Tel Aviv, Gantz also lashed out at two of Netanyahu's ministers, saying Culture Minister Miri Regev is "attacking culture," while Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked is "attacking the justice system." "He's attacking everyone. We need to fix our house," Gantz said. Gantz and Netanyahu have engaged in vicious attacks against one another, which the Blue & White leader said endangered Israel's democracy. "Democracy is functioning, but it is in danger. It is in our interest to try and keep democracy safe," he said. See also, ["At Tol event, Gantz accuses Netanyahu of leading assault on Israeli democracy" \(Tol\)](#)

Time of Israel

PM: Rivlin Looking for 'Excuse' to Task Gantz with Next Govt

Prime Minister Netanyahu told members of his Likud party that President Reuven Rivlin "is just looking for an excuse" to task rival Benny Gantz with forming a government after upcoming elections, in a recording aired Tuesday night by Israeli television. In the recording, which Channel 12 said was made earlier Tuesday at Likud headquarters, Netanyahu urged supporters to head to the polls on April 9, warning a large enough seat advantage for Gantz's Blue and White could prevent Likud from forming the next government. Following the airing of the recording, Rivlin's office put out a statement condemning Netanyahu's remarks. See also, ["Netanyahu Attacks Rivlin: President Is Just Looking for Excuse to Let Gantz Form Government" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

I24 News

Rivlin Cuts Visit to Canada after Wife's Health Deteriorates

Israel's President Reuven Rivlin ended his state visit to Canada on Tuesday sudden deterioration in his wife Nechama's health. "For the last few hours, Nechama has been sedated and is on respiratory support because of severe shortness of breath due to cardiac complications. When the president lands in Israel tomorrow morning, he will go to Beilinson Hospital to be at her side," a statement from Rivlin's office said. "About two weeks ago, Nechama underwent a complicated lung transplant operation because of her medical condition. Since then, she has been undergoing a long and complex process of recovery," it added. See also, ["Rivlin meets Trudeau, thanks him for standing up to BDS, anti-Semitism" \(TOI\)](#)

Following Report, Twitter Blocks Fake Accounts Assisting Likud

Twitter shut down 258 of the over 400 automated and fake accounts on Tuesday, associated with a scam that was exposed in the New York Times and Yedioth Ahronoth Monday, involving an army of fake social media accounts used to boost support for Prime Minister Netanyahu and his Likud party. Yitzhak Haddad, who was described as the heart of the network and operated under the user name "Bond", was one of the users Twitter blocked after the organization received a list of the fake accounts from the internet watchdog organizations that broke the story. Twitter's move is out of the ordinary, and only occurs when the organization's supervising board believes illegal or inappropriate use is being made of the social network. See also, ["Investigators Suspect 150 Accounts Boosting Netanyahu Are Fake – Twitter Blocks 258" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Election Committee Orders Criminal Probe Against Likud Party

The chairman of the Central Elections Committee, Justice Hanan Melcer, instructed the police to open a criminal investigation against the Likud party on Tuesday. The party is suspected to have broken the Propaganda Law when they started the Zazim Yamina (Moving Rightward) election initiative, which supports efforts to garner votes for the right on Election Day. Melcer even recommended putting a gag order on any announcement from Likud that explains that the campaign was run by unaffiliated people or other parties, and called on Likud to erase existing notices on the subject. On Tuesday afternoon, Melcer told Likud General Manager Tzuri Siso that he may face a criminal indictment for his part in the affair, and added that Siso has the right to not answer the committee's questions. See also, ["LIKUD TO BE INVESTIGATED FOR 'MOVE TO THE RIGHT' CAMPAIGN" \(JPost\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Poll Finds Giving Up Rotation w. Lapid Would Help Blue & White

A poll taken on Monday and Tuesday for Channel 13 found that if elections were to be held now, Likud would beat Blue and White, 29 seats to 28. It was the first time Likud had passed Blue and White in polls, taken by respected pollster Camil Fuchs, since Blue and White was founded two months ago. Twenty-four percent of respondents in the poll said that if Blue and White leader Benny Gantz reneged on his commitment to rotate as prime minister with his number two, Yair Lapid, they would be more likely to vote for the party. Only 6% said they would be less likely to vote for the party without Lapid as a co-candidate for prime minister, 56% said it would make no difference and 14% did not know.

Jerusalem Post

Liberman Hopes to Convince a Million US Jews to Move to Israel

The government needs to push for more Jews to immigrate to Israel from the US and other Western countries, by funding Jewish education and Hebrew lessons in their communities, Yisrael Beytenu MK Oded Forrer said on Tuesday. Forrer, number two on Yisrael Beytenu's list and a former director-general of the Immigration Absorption Ministry, described his plan, which comes in conjunction with the party's focus on aliyah, in light of its voter base of Israelis from the former Soviet Union. "The Israeli government has to set a goal for there to be 10 million Jews in Israel in the next 10-15 years - and to reach it, we need massive aliyah from Western countries... We need to bring the number of olim up from 30,000 a year to 60,000-70,000, or even 100,000," Forrer told The Jerusalem Post.

How to Make Trump's Israeli-Palestinian Peace Plan Work

By Michael Singh, managing director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy

- **After two years of playing coy, the Trump administration is reportedly finally ready to unveil its plan for Israeli-Palestinian peace. The plan's details remain confidential, but if it is anything like President Trump's moves so far on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, it will be bold. Some of those steps have worked out far better than the president's critics anticipated. Moving the United States' embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, for example, failed to elicit the protests in the wider Arab world many predicted, even as Israelis celebrated it as correcting a historical injustice.**
- **Another of the administration's bold strokes has been to all but eliminate the United States' once-considerable aid to Palestinians. And while that has attracted far less attention than the embassy move, it is likely to prove more consequential for American and Israeli interests, and for the president's hoped-for deal — and not for the better**
- **Until recently, Palestinians were one of the largest recipients of American aid. Then, in August, the Trump administration announced it would not make about \$300 million in payments due to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, or Unrwa, which provides schooling, housing and other services to those it designates as refugees in Gaza and elsewhere. Around the same time, the State Department also revealed that it was cutting about \$230 million in other aid to the Palestinians, ending support for programs bringing together Palestinian and Israeli children and hospitals in East Jerusalem, among others.**
- **This left untouched only assistance to the Palestinian security forces, long popular with both Israeli and American security officials. Yet in October, Congress adopted and Mr. Trump signed legislation that would make the Palestinian Authority, in return for accepting this and any other assistance, subject to the jurisdiction of American courts. This prompted Palestinian officials at the end of last year to reject further aid.**
- **The Trump administration has good reasons to be frustrated with both the Palestinian leadership and aid organizations. Unrwa has long been accused of failing to adequately monitor its staff and the curriculum in schools that it runs for extremism, and of inflating the number of Palestinian refugees to perpetuate its mission. Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority's president, ordered contacts with the United States frozen after the embassy move and has refused to engage with American envoys regarding the Trump administration's efforts to devise an Israeli-Palestinian peace plan. The United States has made clear that the decisions on aid are meant to apply pressure on Mr. Abbas to return to the negotiating table — a goal consistent with longstanding American policy.**
- **The Trump administration is right that American aid to the Palestinians provides Washington with leverage, but it is applying that leverage to the wrong end. Few observers believe that Mr. Abbas is interested in negotiating with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Trump, having rebuffed their less conservative predecessors or, even if negotiations resumed, that a peace deal could be reached at this time.**
- **Yet aid can be leveraged to advance American aims in other ways. Past administrations have used it to strengthen the authority of Palestinian officials who favor peace and to deter the**

Palestinian Authority from pursuing Israel at the United Nations and in international courts. Congress has sought through the Taylor Force Act to compel the Palestinian Authority to cease the reprehensible practice of paying the families of terrorists, by reducing aid to the Palestinians by an amount equal to what the Palestinian Authority pays to families of prisoners and accused terrorists. And many supporters of Israel would have liked to see American funding for Unrwa used to compel the organization to reform. These goals have been undermined by the elimination of aid. You can't tie strings to assistance that has already been cut.

- Aid is not just about dollars, but about engagement that confers influence. Aid programs bring American officials into contact with a wide swath of Palestinian society, which can help ensure that American influence outlasts the current leadership of the Palestinian Authority. It would be rash to assume that the vacuum left by the United States will not be filled by others, such as Russia, whose agenda in the region diverges sharply from Washington's.**
- Finally, American aid has been a stabilizing influence in both the West Bank and Gaza. Many U.S.A.I.D. programs began in the aftermath of the Second Intifada and were designed to prevent a return to such turbulence. Over the past 15 years, security assistance programs have helped build Palestinian security forces to supplant the semiofficial militias that fueled violence during the Second Intifada. These Palestinian security forces have effectively coordinated with the Israeli Army to combat terrorism in the West Bank.**
- By curtailing violence, raising standards of living and keeping children in school, American assistance has contributed to a long period of relative calm, if not peace. It is for this reason that Israeli officials have for years quietly supported its continuation.**
- Anyone who supports Israeli-Palestinian peace should hope for the success of Mr. Trump's plan. But peace will ultimately require more than the agreement of leaders. It will require a Palestinian security force that can fend off those determined to use violence to derail peace efforts and a civil society that can ensure that peace is not just a top-down proposition. Aid to the Palestinians — conditional and coordinated with Israel — should be a part of American policy. It could not only help President Trump's plan succeed but also ensure stability if peace efforts founder.**

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Israel's Year of the Undecided Voter

By Akiva Eldar, columnist at AI Monitor

- Israeli pundits were busy on March 31 shoveling through the mud that candidates on the right, left and center of the political spectrum have been slinging at each other. The job has been ongoing since the campaign for the April 9 elections began.
- There was the latest update on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's alleged involvement in the scandal stemming from Israel's purchase of German naval vessels. Then there was in-depth analysis to be done on why Netanyahu rival Lt. Gen. (res.) Benny Gantz, leader of the Blue and White party, stuttered during an interview and the deconstruction of an interview by Lt. Gen. (res.) Gabi Ashkenazi, a Gantz colleague from the Blue and White. Talk shows and call-in programs speculated about the real reason the outspoken television presenter Oshrat Kotler had taken a leave of absence. Nine days before the elections, news editions also found time to report that a pelican had been found meandering along a major highway. Not a word, however, was said about the final communique of the annual Arab League summit that wrapped up March 31 in Tunis with discussion of the Palestinian issue.
- Who cares that the Arab states reiterated support for their 2002 peace initiative with Israel? So what if the Arab League insists on once again offering Israel full diplomatic relations and peace based on the 1967 borders? More so, they are offering it despite the booby traps placed in their path by Netanyahu and his friend President Donald Trump: the relocation of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and US recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights.
- In November 2017, the Knesset held a special session at the request of more than 40 lawmakers to discuss the “diplomatic challenges facing the Israeli government in view of the latest opportunities” for peace. Knesset member Isaac Herzog, then chair of the opposition and leader of the Zionist Camp, turned to Netanyahu and said, “We are talking about a dramatic regional move and you know it exists.... Since 2009 you have missed historic opportunities time after time.” Herzog was referring to Netanyahu's last-minute pullback from a regional peace initiative led by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.
- Herzog urged Netanyahu to “make dramatic decisions and answer the question of how to ensure the future of the Jewish people's nation-state.” He asked the prime minister whether he wanted his legacy to be one of “sit and do nothing until the Jewish majority is lost” and whether he wanted to be remembered for disseminating hatred and incitement against the attorney general, police commissioner and the media. As expected, Netanyahu answered that prime ministers can only be replaced at the ballot box and boasted that due to “our tremendous achievements, the public has decided over and over that I will stand here [at the Knesset podium], and you will sit there [on the opposition benches].”
- Indeed, in democratic regimes, voters choose their leaders. The upcoming elections will not, however, be determined by the achievements of Netanyahu governments over the past decade in the healthcare, education, transportation and economic sectors. Defense will not be determinative, nor will his government's contribution to resolving the bloody conflict with the Palestinians and bringing about regional peace. Instead, the electoral outcome will be determined by those Israelis torn between casting an “ideological” vote or a “strategic” vote.

- Poll findings announced March 31 on Channel 12 News revealed that 25% of voters are not enthusiastic about Netanyahu or Gantz as prime minister, with 38% preferring a fifth term for Netanyahu and 36% wanting Gantz to replace him. The rest do not support either candidate or are undecided.
- On the left wing, the undecided voters are torn between supporting parties that reflect their views — such as Labor, Meretz or the Geshet, led by Knesset member Orly Levy-Abekasis — or voting for Gantz’s Blue and White, which prides itself on the hollow, “pragmatic” slogan “There is no left, and no right.”
- On the one hand, these undecided voters are being told that a significant electoral advantage for Gantz and his running mate Yair Lapid over the Likud would boost their chances of forming the next government and getting rid of Netanyahu. There is also concern about “wasted” votes, those cast for small parties that ultimately do not garner enough votes to enter the Knesset. “Everyone understands that the only way to replace Netanyahu is to vote Blue and White,” Lapid, a centrist, declared on March 31. “There is no choice, even Labor Party people should vote Blue and White because a Labor vote ensures Netanyahu will remain in power.”
- On the other hand, the left remembers that the same Lapid had joined Netanyahu's right-wing government in the past and incited against the human rights organizations Breaking the Silence and B’Tselem. Not only that, Channel 13 aired recordings of Gantz talking in private meetings about the possibility of including Netanyahu’s Likud in a government that he would head and even possibly joining a Netanyahu-led government. The Labor Party then warned, “Anyone voting Blue and White will be responsible for forming the next Netanyahu government.” An undecided leftist would therefore do better voting his convictions, saving himself from a morning-after election hangover.
- Perhaps, however, it is important to ensure that the Defense Ministry not be put in the hands of the hardliner and New Right leader Naftali Bennett and that the nationalist Knesset member Bezalel Smotrich not be entrusted with the Education Ministry. Maybe it would be better to leave the door open for the “deal of the century” Trump’s administration is cooking up for Israeli-Palestinian peace.
- Labor and Meretz argue that if Gantz is successful in cobbling together a government coalition, left-wing liberals must join it in order to counterbalance the Blue and White, which is heavy on right-wing conservative candidates. Life is hard for the undecided. Having a far easier time of it are those who have concluded that this is not the time for such “luxuries” as peace and human rights and that removing Netanyahu is the only goal.
- On the right on the political map, the undecided voters are vacillating between a strategic vote for the Likud and a vote for one of the more radical parties, such as the New Right, the United Right, Zehut, led by the libertarian Moshe Feiglin, or Yisrael Beitenu, led by former Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman. Then there is the option of Kulanu, the ‘softer’ right party headed by Moshe Kahlon.
- The considerations for the right resemble those for the left: the desire to ensure that their leader, Netanyahu, is able to form a government that embraces the dream of a Greater Land of Israel weighed against reservations about the corruption scandals dogging him and his extravagant lifestyle. This camp, too, fears that voting for a small party could be a wasted vote if the party fails to get into the Knesset. On this side, as well, life is much easier for the “Netanyahu at all

cost” voters, whose loyalty to their leader blinds them to the clouds of corruption and hedonism engulfing him.

- From now until April 9, the two major parties will focus their efforts on attracting supporters of their satellites on the left and right but without removing the satellites from the running altogether by denying them sufficient votes to cross the electoral threshold and enter the Knesset. And what about the historic initiative for Arab-Israeli peace that was once again endorsed this week? It is not even in the running on April 9.

SUMMARY: On the one hand, these undecided voters are being told that a significant electoral advantage for Gantz and his running mate Yair Lapid over the Likud would boost their chances of forming the next government and getting rid of Netanyahu. There is also concern about “wasted” votes, those cast for small parties that ultimately do not garner enough votes to enter the Knesset. “Everyone understands that the only way to replace Netanyahu is to vote Blue and White,” Lapid, a centrist, declared on March 31. “There is no choice, even Labor Party people should vote Blue and White because a Labor vote ensures Netanyahu will remain in power.” On the other hand, the left remembers that the same Lapid had joined Netanyahu's right-wing government in the past and incited against the human rights organizations Breaking the Silence and B'Tselem. Not only that, Channel 13 aired recordings of Gantz talking in private meetings about the possibility of including Netanyahu's Likud in a government that he would head and even possibly joining a Netanyahu-led government. The Labor Party then warned, “Anyone voting Blue and White will be responsible for forming the next Netanyahu government.” An undecided leftist would therefore do better voting his convictions, saving himself from a morning-after election hangover.