



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

April 5, 2019

Times of Israel

After 37 Years, Missing Soldier Baumel Buried in Military Funeral

Sgt. First Class Zachary Baumel was laid to rest in Jerusalem's Mount Herzl military cemetery on Thursday evening, nearly 37 years after his death in the First Lebanon War's battle of Sultan Yacoub in 1982, at the age of 21. Thousands turned out for the ceremony, where Baumel — whose remains were returned to Israel days ago after a complex IDF intelligence operation and with central Russian assistance — was eulogized by President Reuven Rivlin and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, among others. Also attending were Baumel's family, friends, IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kohavi, former chief of staff Gabi Ashkenazi, Culture Minister Miri Regev and top officials from the IDF's armored corps, Baumel's unit. See also, ["Israel buries remains of soldier recovered by Russian forces in Syria" \(Reuters\)](#)

I24 News

Nuclear Watchdog Inspected Iranian Site Revealed by Israel

Officials from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN agency responsible for monitoring nuclear activities, have visited a secret nuclear site in Iran's capital Tehran multiple times over the last few months, Reuters reports. The site was revealed to the world in a theatrical performance by Israeli PM Netanyahu on September 27th, 2018 during the UN General Assembly. At the time, Netanyahu called on the IAEA to visit the warehouse immediately, alleging that it had been used to store radioactive material. This was part of the Israeli PM's strategy to show that Tehran was still pursuing nuclear armament, despite the 2015 nuclear agreement. See also, ["Sources: UN nuclear watchdog inspects Iran 'warehouse' Netanyahu pointed to" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Gantz: I Hope Trump, Putin not Working for Netanyahu

Two weeks after US President Donald Trump recognized Israeli control over the Golan Heights and a day after Russian President Vladimir Putin helped bring home missing-in-action soldier Zachary Baumel, Blue and White leader Benny Gantz said he hoped Trump and Putin were not purposely aiding Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's campaign. Asked by The Jerusalem Post in an interview in his Tel Aviv office whether Trump and Putin were trying to help Netanyahu get reelected, Gantz said: "One could think like that. I hope that's not the case." Regarding the return of Baumel's body after 37 years, just ahead of the April 9 election, Gantz said: "One can look at it as political spin but I put it aside totally". See also, ["Netanyahu Closes in on Election Victory, Courtesy of Putin's Decisive 'October Surprise'" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Gantz and Netanyahu Neck and Neck in Election Polls

Two new polls published by Israel's Channel 12 and public broadcaster Kan Thursday evening predicted a tight race between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party and his rival Benny Gantz's Kahol Lavan, but a clear advantage for the right-wing bloc. According to the Channel 12 poll, Kahol Lavan would get 30 Knesset seats if the election was held today, whereas Likud would get 26 seats. Even in that scenario, however, the center-left bloc would only get 56 seats compared to 64 for the right-wing bloc. Kan's poll projected that Likud would get 31 Knesset seats and Kahol Lavan 30 seats. See also, ["Why This Is the Most Difficult Election to Predict Since Netanyahu's First Victory" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Lapid: If we Beat Likud by 4 Seats, We'll Form a Coalition

If Blue and White beats Likud by four or more seats in Tuesday's elections, "no power on earth" will stop it forming the next coalition, the centrist party's No.2 Yair Lapid said Thursday. Lapid was speaking shortly before Channel 12's final pre-election poll gave Blue and White, headed by ex-IDF chief Benny Gantz, a 30-26 seat advantage over Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud, although a Kan Channel 11 poll forecast a 31-30 advantage to Likud. Both polls indicated that a Netanyahu-led right-wing and religious bloc could build a 64-seat coalition, but Lapid was adamant that some parties that have made plain their preference for Likud over Blue and White could change their stance if his party defeats Netanyahu's by four or more seats.

Arab Israelis Push for Stronger Knesset Voice amid Boycott Calls

In the days ahead of Israel's April 9 elections, activists in the country's north were not trying to convince some residents who to vote for — but just to vote. Israel's Arab citizens, who account for some 17.5 percent of the population, have been engaged in a debate over whether to boycott the upcoming elections. In 2015, Arab parties ran under one alliance and finished with a historic tally: they won 13 seats out of 120 in the Knesset, making them the third-largest force. But this year the Arab population is facing their own divisions in addition to hostility from Israel's right-wing and questions over whether participating in the elections in the past has brought any real benefit. See also, ["Arab Israelis alienated by both top candidates as vote approaches"](#).(Al Monitor)

Dozens of Gaza Area Residents Pitch Tents in Tel Aviv in Protest

Dozens of Gaza border communities' residents erected tents in Rothschild Avenue in Tel Aviv on Thursday night in protest against the lack of personal security in the south of the country due to Hamas rockets and incendiary balloons, Haaretz reported. Blue and White leader Benny Gantz spoke with them and vowed that when he will be Prime Minister "you will be those I value, not Captain George." Gantz was referring to a man who spends a great deal of his time writing on social media on behalf of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. After many accused Captain George's account and other pro-Likud accounts of being bots, or not a real person, Netanyahu introduced the world to the real Captain George. Gantz also said that a government must give citizens two things "decisions and truth," and added that the current government is afraid of criticism and "Facebook trolls."

Israeli Spacecraft Enters Lunar Orbit Ahead of Moon Landing

The first Israeli spacecraft to journey to the moon passed its most crucial test yet on Thursday when it dropped into lunar orbit one week ahead of landing. After traveling over 5.5 million kilometers (3.4 million miles) around the Earth and drawing ever closer to the moon, the spacecraft finally swung into the moon's elliptical orbit - keeping it on track for touchdown April 11. "This was a milestone and it actually gives us a real shot at the moon," said Yonatan Winetraub, co-founder of SpacEL, the Israeli nonprofit that built the spacecraft. The lander, is the smallest spacecraft in history to have entered the moon's orbit. In order to catapult away from the Earth and successfully "catch" the moon's gravitational pull, Beresheet needed to slow down from 8,500 kilometers per hour (5,300 mph) to 7,500 kilometers per hour (4,700 mph). See also, ["Israel just became the seventh nation to orbit the moon"](#) (NBC)

Benny Gantz Is the Best Candidate for Prime Minister

Ha'aretz Editorial

- In an amazingly short time, Benny Gantz has changed Israel's political map. For the first time in a decade, Benjamin Netanyahu is facing a rival whom the public views as a comparable candidate for prime minister.
- Gantz's military experience has given him an advantage over the civilian politicians who challenged Netanyahu in the past and failed. He has also racked up an impressive success in politics, where, despite his lack of experience, he quickly set up the Kahol Lavan joint ticket – which incorporates Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid party and Gantz's predecessors as army chief of staff, Moshe Ya'alon and Gabi Ashkenazi – and brought it into the lead in the polls, in a tight race with Netanyahu's Likud party.
- Additionally, Gantz has displayed impressive stamina in the face of a campaign of incitement and smears by Netanyahu and his supporters, who have labeled the Kahol Lavan leader a sex offender, a pervert vulnerable to extortion, a psychiatric case and a traitor.
- Gantz isn't a dream candidate for people who want a liberal, egalitarian, peace-seeking Israel that treats minorities with respect and preserves economic responsibility. He has boasted of killing Palestinians in Gaza, refrained from endorsing the two-state solution, equivocated about the nation-state law, ruled out the Arab parties as coalition partners and presented an economic plan that involves running up the deficit
- He hasn't spent a single day as a Knesset member, his diplomatic experience is limited, he's no expert in economics and he has minimal understanding of social issues. Even his promises not to sit in a government with Netanyahu aren't perceived as credible.
- But despite his weaknesses, and the learning curve he'd have to undergo if elected, Gantz is the best candidate for prime minister. He is preferable because he represents the statesmanlike behavior that Netanyahu destroyed, and he promised to fix the nation-state law. He is preferable because he respects the rule of law, which Netanyahu, with his natural partners, trampled into the dust during his last term, and if reelected, will finish the job by passing a law to give sitting prime ministers immunity from prosecution, and carry out Ayelet Shaked and Itamar Ben Gvir's plans.
- Gantz is preferable because he seeks a compromise with the Palestinians and doesn't seek to annex territory and deepen the occupation, as Netanyahu does. He is preferable because unlike Netanyahu, who is bored by Israelis' day-to-day concerns, he has at least promised to deal with social problems, health and education rather than being focused, as Netanyahu is, on self-glorification, lies, incitement and sowing division. Gantz is preferable because on Election Day, you have to choose reality, not dreams. And he offers Israel a better reality than Netanyahu does.

Netanyahu Has Cunningly Navigated the Mideast. Israeli Voters Will Reward Him

By Amos Harel, columnist at Ha'aretz

- The grand finale of the Likud election campaign was held in Moscow on Thursday. It is no wonder that Netanyahu did not adopt the suggestion of his campaign headquarters staff to hold a large rally at Rabin Square before the election – and not only because of the fraught history of the site. In the end, it was decided to hold a small rally in Jerusalem on Sunday.
- Why worry that the square in Tel Aviv will be full of supporters when instead there's the option of holding a joint press conference with the president of Russia in Moscow? As in the past several weeks, it is Netanyahu who is dictating the rules of the game in the election campaign. He has therefore been able in the past few days to launch a blitz of interviews, after four years in which he saw to it not to give interviews to any media outlet that he himself didn't fully control.
- The invitation from Putin wraps up a triple play for Netanyahu in less than two weeks: a visit to U.S. President Donald Trump, who gave him the gift of American recognition of Israel's sovereignty in the Golan Heights (but which was somewhat overshadowed when Hamas forced him to cut short his visit to Washington due to the escalation in Gaza). Then Netanyahu hosted of his new friend Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro in Jerusalem, followed on Thursday by the summit in Moscow, just after the return of Baumel's body.
- Russia is going with the likely winner in the election in Israel and it is prepared to help him, within the limits of its own interests. It is not expelling the Iranians and Hezbollah from the Syrian Golan, and it is continuing to prepare for the transfer of the advanced S-300 long range surface-to-air missile batteries to full Syrian control. But if Israel is asking for a little help on a humanitarian issue – why not? We can count on Putin to see to it that he gets a fitting quid pro quo for his generosity at some point.
- The message that Netanyahu's Likud party wants to convey through this series of meetings is transparent. Israeli hospitals are collapsing under the patient load, public transportation is lagging, personal security in Gaza border communities is shaky, but when Israel turns to the international arena, Netanyahu, his experience and his connections have no real competition. Only Bibi can do it.
- A similar claim, incidentally, was made towards the end of the terms of office of two of his predecessors, Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert. The later basked in affection of foreign leaders all the way to the courthouse and then prison. Netanyahu's record in the diplomatic and security arena is not the total disaster that is described by his rivals. The prime minister was smart enough early on to understand the dangers inherent in the Arab Spring.
- He strengthened relations with the Sunni countries considerably, from Egypt to the Gulf. He (usually) managed not to get involved in the civil war in Syria, and for the most part, he took care not to get dragged into unnecessary wars in Gaza. Even in Operation Protective Edge in 2014, he did not cave into pressures from inside his cabinet to invade the entire Gaza Strip.

- The international community's nuclear agreement with Iran, which Netanyahu opposed, was developed by President Barack Obama's administration to a large extent in response to Israel's threat to attack Iran's nuclear installations. And Trump's withdrawal from the treaty, spurred by his friend in Jerusalem, hasn't so far led to the disaster that he was warned about. The renewed American sanctions have also affected European companies and have increased the economic pressure on the regime but for the time being, they have not scuttled the agreement itself, as Netanyahu would have liked.
- The most persuasive claim against Netanyahu in the diplomatic-political area is the total lack of action on the Palestinian issue. The odds of obtaining a final status solution are minuscule (even in the opinion of his rival, Benny Gantz), but the suspension of the peace process, along with extensive construction in West Bank settlements, is gradually putting the kibbosh on the vision of the two-state solution that Netanyahu momentarily adopted under pressure from Obama 10 years ago.
- However, the main argument for ending Netanyahu's long period in office has to do with his conduct on the domestic front, not his handling of foreign affairs. The serious suspicions against him in a string of criminal cases, along with Likud's orchestrated attacks on public servants and the systematic damage to the rule of law, are sufficient to lead to the conclusion that Netanyahu has played a key role in corrupting Israeli society over the past decade. He has surrounded himself with unworthy people, encouraged an enterprise of flattery over him and his family and has consistently fueled discord and hatred among various segments of society. And all of this has accelerated and intensified, as if in some giant centrifuge, in the run-up to the election.
- The figure of Netanyahu has been with us for so many years that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the original and the imitation on the satirical television show "Eretz Nehederet," which doesn't appear to bother his voters at all. The two merge into a single character: On the television show, Netanyahu is depicted as a smiling and fraudulent schemer, who always has the upper hand even when his efforts at deception are clearly evident to everyone. In "life itself" as he calls it – that is, in the campaign – he acts as if he is the political incarnation of King Midas. Any accusation from his rivals somehow becomes an electoral asset, exploited to his benefit.
- In recent months the public opinion polls gone the gamut, from a smattering of hope for a victory by his rivals after the Yair Lapid and Benny Gantz teamed up, and then back a clear advantage for the right-wing bloc. If the public opinion polls aren't wrong again, they apparently reflect what the majority of Israelis think about their leader: In the Middle East, a manipulator is necessary. The gravity of the criminal acts of which the prime minister is suspected is outweighed by the feeling of security he inculcates in his supporters in facing the dangers from outside. And by this measure, Gantz – dignified, statesmanlike, fair, a bit awkward – who wouldn't meet even the most elementary threshold of swindling.
- The left's hopes of removing him from office will apparently have to again focus on Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, who is planning on holding a pre-indictment hearing for Netanyahu's defense lawyers this summer and to make a decision on indicting Netanyahu at the beginning of next year. People who are familiar with investigation material that isn't being made

public before the election, as Mandelblit's decided would be done, say the material is very damaging to the prime minister's line of defense.

- The recent revelations in the case of company shares that Netanyahu received from his cousin Nathan Milikowsky could complicate his situation further. Waiting in the wings is also Case 3000, involving alleged corruption in Israel's purchase of submarines and patrol from Germany, into which the attorney general and the police have only conducted a limited inquiry. The stench from the boats and any possible links to the country's natural gas deals have not yet been fully investigated.
- Going by the hints that Netanyahu has been dropping in his recent interviews, the legislative effort to stop the clock on the investigations is expected to be renewed after the election. The results depend on the attorney general's backbone, the conduct of Netanyahu's coalition partners and the resoluteness of the Supreme Court justices.
- In what appears to be inadequate media treatment, this week's reporting on alleged social media manipulation in service of the Likud campaign has been buried. The pretensions of exposure of a huge digital plot was replaced by public debate over the right to curse and vilify in social media. The Central Elections Committee hearing on the matter became a farce, mainly revealing the ignorance regarding internet technology on the part of the committee and Kahol Lavan's representatives. The left and the center came across trying to silent dirty talk, as if that were the most urgent issue in the final weeks of the election campaign.
- Are bots being used in more distant circles, as far away as Indonesia and the Philippines, to echo Netanyahu's messages and those who support them? Possibly. But what was revealed after the publication of the investigation is that at the center of the activity are flesh and blood Likud supporters who see Netanyahu as a last barricade, almost a divine messenger, against the return of what they describe as "the Oslo disaster" – evacuation of settlements and exploding buses. If indeed someone is operating another, hidden system in support of Netanyahu, he or she was not exposed in the investigative report this week and no connection was found between such a person and those in charge of Likud campaign messages.
- In this context, it is interesting to go back to an event that was quickly forgotten, which took place a relatively short time before the announcement of early elections. On November 14th of last year, Avigdor Lieberman announced his resignation as defense minister, in protest against the government's policy in the Gaza Strip. Lieberman resigned from the government after Netanyahu rejected his recommendation of a harsher response to the firing of about 500 rockets and mortar shells from the Gaza Strip into the Negev.
- A few hours after Lieberman's resignation, Ran Bar-Zik reported a strange story in Haaretz. An internet site that depicted itself as the official site of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, a prestigious research center at Harvard University, published a report of a lecture delivered a few days earlier by former Mossad chief Tamir Pardo. Pardo, the report claimed, said in the lecture that Lieberman is "a Russian spy" and that this is behind the tension between him and Netanyahu. Pardo supposedly even anticipated a few days in advance that Netanyahu would fire Lieberman.
- A short investigation found that this was fake news of a dangerous sort. Pardo did indeed appear at the Belfer Center, but he never said those things about Lieberman. And although the design of the site was indeed very similar to that of the real Belfer Center, the address was slightly

different and promoted a site that distributed a fake news item. Someone put together a fraudulent operation here that certainly must have cost a pretty penny.

- On the basis of an old and discredited rumor to the effect that Lieberman's origins testify to him being a Russian agent, a plot was constructed. To that end, the story was superimposed on a lecture that Pardo indeed delivered, in a closed forum (which required a close knowledge of the Belfer timetable), a site was fabricated and use was made of a (fictitious but long-standing) Twitter account from which tweets were sent to journalists to draw their attention to the "news item" about Pardo's remarks. The move failed because Haaretz identified the site as counterfeit and also contacted Pardo, who denied the statements entirely.
- Whom did this fraudulent, sophisticated and relatively expensive effort serve? It is doubtful that it was the Russians. First of all, Lieberman is not an agent of theirs. And secondly, even if he were (entirely hypothetically), why would they expose him? It seems there was a diversionary action involved here, which if it hadn't been exposed would perhaps have succeeded in drowning out Lieberman's criticism of the policy in Gaza. This brings to mind the old diagnosis of Soviet propaganda: They aren't pursuing a propaganda effort so that we will believe in something. They are using propaganda so that we will not believe anyone or anything.

SUMMARY: Netanyahu's record in the diplomatic and security arena is not the total disaster that is described by his rivals. The prime minister was smart enough early on to understand the dangers inherent in the Arab Spring. He strengthened relations with the Sunni countries considerably, from Egypt to the Gulf. He (usually) managed not to get involved in the civil war in Syria, and for the most part, he took care not to get dragged into unnecessary wars in Gaza. Even in Operation Protective Edge in 2014, he did not cave into pressures from inside his cabinet to invade the entire Gaza Strip. The international community's nuclear agreement with Iran, which Netanyahu opposed, was developed by President Barack Obama's administration to a large extent in response to Israel's threat to attack Iran's nuclear installations. And Trump's withdrawal from the treaty, spurred by his friend in Jerusalem, hasn't so far led to the disaster that he was warned about. The renewed American sanctions have also affected European companies and have increased the economic pressure on the regime but for the time being, they have not scuttled the agreement itself, as Netanyahu would have liked.