



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Wednesday, April 10

Headlines:

- **Netanyahu Appears Set to Clinch Fifth Term in Office**
- **Election Winners and Losers**
- **Likud MK Launches Exoneration Campaign for Netanyahu**
- **Israeli Arabs Blast ‘Racist’ Likud Camera Scheme**
- **Erekat: Israelis Voted to ‘Maintain the Status Quo’**
- **Pompeo, in Senate Testimony, Refuses to Back Two States**
- **Airbnb Reverses Settlement Policy After Lawsuit**
- **New Poll Finds Palestinians Deeply Distrust Leaders**

Commentary:

- **Ma’ariv: “Anything’s Possible”**
 - By Ben Caspit, Senior Columnist
- **Times of Israel: “Netanyahu, the Divisive Force Who Wouldn’t Lose”**
 - By David Horowitz, Editor

News Excerpts

April 10, 2019

Washington Post

Netanyahu Appears Set to Clinch Fifth Term in Office

With the vast majority of votes by Wednesday morning, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu looked set to clinch a fifth term in office, despite corruption charges and a strong challenger. Both Netanyahu's Likud and Gantz's Blue and White were set to win 35 seats in Israel's 120-member Knesset. Still, Netanyahu appeared to be the one with a clear path to forming a coalition. His natural allies in the right wing brought a combined 65 seats.

Ha'aretz

Election Winners and Losers

Netanyahu couldn't have hoped for better results. Every element that had been a problem for him was diminished or eliminated outright, and his dream of serving as prime minister under indictment seems increasingly realistic. The ultra-Orthodox parties grew from 13 seats in the outgoing Knesset to 16. Avigdor Lieberman and his Yisrael Beiteinu party crossed the threshold, though many polls had suggested they wouldn't. The primary losers were Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked's New Right Party, which did not make it. And the Labor party dwindled to only 6 seats.

Times of Israel

Likud MK Launches Exoneration Campaign for Netanyahu

A Likud lawmaker moved on Wednesday to launch an exoneration campaign for Netanyahu in the three corruption cases against him. Likud's dramatic election victory Tuesday meant that prosecutors should reconsider pursuing criminal charges against Netanyahu, Likud MK Miki Zohar said in a blitz of media interviews, arguing that indicting a victorious Netanyahu would amount to subverting the public will. "The people decided that the cases [against Netanyahu] aren't criminal in nature," Zohar argued.

Times of Israel

Israeli Arabs Blast 'Racist' Likud Camera Scheme

Arab residents of Tamra and Shfaram overwhelmingly lashed out at Likud on Tuesday for equipping election observers at polling stations in Arab towns with cameras. Residents sharply criticized the scheme, with some calling it "racist." A 42-year-old Tamra resident asked, "How am I supposed to have confidence in the government when the ruling party is willing to flagrantly violate election rules?"

Times of Israel

Erekat: Israelis Voted to ‘Maintain the Status Quo’

A senior Palestinian official said Tuesday night Israelis had voted to “maintain the status quo.” Saeb Erekat, chief Palestinian negotiator and champion of Palestinian statehood, called Tuesday’s results “a clear-cut vote” to maintain the years-long impasse in the peace process, adding, “they want us to live under a deeper apartheid system than that existed in the darkest hours of South African apartheid.” Ahead of the vote, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas had said he hoped the elections could help bring peace. He had not expressed support for a specific candidate.

Times of Israel

Pompeo, in Senate Testimony, Refuses to Back Two States

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Tuesday refused to reaffirm American support for a Palestinian state. Testifying before a Senate subcommittee, Pompeo declined to respond when Democrats asked him to back a two-state solution. “Ultimately, the Israelis and Palestinians will decide how to resolve this,” Pompeo replied. Pompeo said that President Donald Trump’s aides Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt would soon lay out a proposal “to resolve a problem that’s been going on for decades and decades that previous administrations couldn’t solve.”

Jerusalem Post

Airbnb Reverses Settlement Policy After Lawsuit

Airbnb announced on Tuesday that it would rescind its decision to ban rental listings in the West Bank following a US lawsuit. The rental giant had said in November 2018 that it would ban Israeli property owners living in the West Bank from advertising on its site following objections from groups seeking to boycott Israel. Under the terms of the settlement agreement, Airbnb has agreed to repeal the ban, resolving the discrimination lawsuit Shurat Hadin had filed in a federal court in Delaware on behalf of a group of US citizens. Airbnb said it would donate the money earned to “nonprofit organizations dedicated to humanitarian aid.”

Times of Israel

New Poll Finds Palestinians Deeply Distrust Leaders

A new public opinion survey showed the overwhelming majority of Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are disillusioned with their leaders and desperate for presidential elections. The poll, conducted by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Center and released Tuesday, showed that only 11 percent of Palestinians trust Abbas, and 6% trust Hamas leader Ismael Haniyeh. Around 48% said they don’t trust any political figure, and 87% are demanding elections.

Anything's Possible

By Ben Caspit, Senior Columnist

- I have to start today by saying something nice about Benny Gantz and his top three partners in the Blue and White Party. He came out of nowhere, climbed from below, worked according to plan, stumbled and got back up, took heat, was hounded and smeared, justifiably and unjustifiably, but he stayed on his feet. He has a good shot at finishing this election with the largest party in Israel. A party that was founded around two months ago out of thin air. A party that was fueled primarily by the desire to create an alternative to Binyamin Netanyahu. Well, that alternative is alive and kicking today. Its ultimate fate has not yet been determined, but it is here.
- Behind Gantz stood Yair Lapid, Gabi Ashkenazi and Moshe (Bogie) Yaalon. Behind Binyamin Netanyahu stood Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, mountains of money and an infinite supply of mendacious spin and dirty tricks. At the end of the day, more Israelis voted for Benny Gantz and Yair Lapid. This accomplishment is nothing short of amazing. Having said all that, if he does not go on to form the government, he will not have succeeded in practical terms. It's hard to believe that Gantz will get a second chance. According to the exit polls, there is no way to decisively state who will be the next prime minister of Israel. Anything and everything is totally possible. The tension will not abate until the last of the soldiers' ballots arrive. The issue of the blocs also cannot be resolved until the last moment. The dramatic questions are: will Raam-Balad make it or not? Will Bennett-Shaked make it or not? What does fate hold in store for Avigdor Lieberman? And will Feiglin become Fake-lin? Every one of these questions could prove decisive for the photo finish, and every one of them is liable/likely to seal the fate of the entire campaign.
- Two people hold the keys: Avigdor Lieberman and Moshe Kahlon. Lieberman, as is his wont, is mysterious and vague, enjoying every second. He did not say yesterday that he would recommend Netanyahu [to the president for the task of forming the government]. The way I know him, today he'll definitely go on vacation in Moldova. In quiet talks that took place recently, Blue and White officials learned that there is a good chance that Lieberman will not recommend Netanyahu to Rivlin. He probably decided that this would be his last term. On the other hand, Lieberman could reverse himself at any moment. Only he will decide. Gantz had better not be counting on him, but that would be dangerous for Netanyahu too. Lieberman is the politician who has been eulogized and buried the most in contemporary Israeli politics, second only to Shimon Peres. As of last night, it is still unclear what fate has in store for him. The second is Moshe Kahlon. In order to avoid losing seats from the right, Kahlon declared during the campaign, "There's no reason for me not to recommend Netanyahu." That doesn't mean that he can't find a reason today or tomorrow. Kahlon, like Lieberman, has talked quite a bit with Gantz's people in recent weeks. He will have to make a decision too.

- Netanyahu blew the right to smithereens. He gave no quarter. He is fighting a war not only for power, but also for his personal freedom and his life itself. Bibi's happy day could become catastrophic for him, because if Bennett and Feiglin get left out, he could be left out as well. On the other hand, he'll always have the Arabs. In 2015, he smeared them on the last day and got his fans to the polls. In 2019, they themselves did not vote in droves and stayed home. If the Arabs leave Raam-Balad out of the Knesset, it will be the most spectacular own goal ever scored here.
- One more thing is certain: if he is assigned the task of forming the government, Netanyahu will not begin coalition negotiations from a position of strength. He cannot dictate a French law or an immunity law to his partners. He will not have a corruption/indictment coalition. He should be praying now that Bennett makes it into the Knesset thanks to the soldiers' votes and hope that Ayelet Shaked and he don't harbor dreams of revenge to the point of not recommending [him] to Rivlin, or even recommending themselves. After what the Missus screamed about them at Balfour Street on the eve of Election Day, even this pair's iron stomach might have had enough. In a normal country, a national unity government would be formed next week. Israel is not a normal country. Binyamin Netanyahu is suspected of serious corruption, and it's not over yet: the case of the stock shares could grow into a fourth indictment. All sides are bound by their campaign proclamations, and it will be very hard to picture Gantz joining Bibi—that is, Bibi joining Gantz in an alternating premiership. On the other hand, we have already seen worse. And as stated: anything and everything is totally possible.

Netanyahu, the Divisive Force Who Refused to be Beaten

By David Horovitz, Editor

- In the end, the combined might of three former Israeli army chiefs proved no match for the political will of Benjamin Netanyahu. A divisive force of nature who commandeered the airwaves, took over the vegetable markets, monopolized social media and even called potential voters out of the sea at Netanya beach on election day, Netanyahu simply refused to be beaten.

He had help. President Donald Trump gifted him the sensationally timed US recognition of Israeli sovereignty on the Golan late last month, and the branding of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Force as a terror group this week. President Vladimir Putin pitched in with Russia's return of the remains of Zachary Baumel, 37 years after the Brooklyn-born IDF tank commander's death in the Lebanon War. He didn't always play fair. His "vote Likud, only Likud" gevalt mantra of the campaign's final days siphoned votes away from his ostensible right-wing partners. His Likud party's hiring of activists to deploy hidden cameras in Arab polling stations Tuesday will require further investigation, as will the impact that tactic had on turnout in the Arab sector. The effort to depict his key rival Benny Gantz as mentally unstable was truly a low.

He proved spectacularly adept in turning the potential major embarrassment of an ostensible exposé of illicit twitter campaigning into a victory over his accusers, even at the price of bringing the homophobic extremist "Captain George" into the Prime Minister's Residence. He also used reprehensible means toward the single end of winning by brokering the construction of the Union of Right-Wing Parties, with the inclusion of the Kahanist Otzma Yehudit, when seeking to prevent the loss of vital right-wing votes (even as he was happy to try to consign Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked's New Right to political oblivion).

And as he now prepares to try to build a majority coalition, there is widespread suspicion that he will tacitly condition key roles for his potential partners on their readiness to support legislation that would protect him from his looming indictment for fraud, breach of trust and, in one case, bribery. Netanyahu has denied this with greater and lesser conviction in recent days. Some potential partners, such as Kulanu's Moshe Kahlon, have said they would never support the move; others, such as URWP's would-be education minister Bezalel Smotrich, have said they will champion it. But at the end of it all — at the end of a bitter campaign in which he denigrated those three ex-chiefs of staff as "weak leftists," and battered the media and the cops and the state prosecutors for leading an ostensible witch-hunt against him over his alleged corruption — Netanyahu overnight Tuesday-Wednesday was emerging victorious again, heading for his fifth term in office.

It wasn't all his doing. He benefited from Israelis' gradual shift to the right: In 1999, he was defeated by another ex-IDF chief and political newcomer, Ehud Barak, in part because a goodly proportion of the electorate believed that he was missing opportunities for peace. That was not

the case this time. Not in an Israel still traumatized by the Second Intifada. Not in an Israel reminded intermittently by Hezbollah's tunnels, rockets and threats, and by Hamas rocket attacks, of the dangers of relinquishing adjacent territory.

He also benefited from Gantz's understandable awkwardness in his fresh political career, and the Blue and White camp's wider failure even to exploit rocket fire on Tel Aviv to undermine his Mr. Security credentials. Ultimately, even that unprecedented assembly of military men could not persuade enough Israelis to trust anyone but Netanyahu at the helm. Both Gantz and Netanyahu made victory speeches in the first few hours after the polling stations closed late Tuesday night. But Gantz's was misguided. Netanyahu bided his time, and had the final word. In that address, with victory about to be formalized, he could afford to sound magnanimous for the first time in the election campaign — to promise that while he would work to build a right-wing government, he would be the prime minister of all Israelis, right and left, Jewish and non-Jewish. Just hours earlier, and for weeks and months before that, his tone had been so very different. But now he was King Bibi, about to be recrowned.