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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Thursday, April 11

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April 11, 2019

Ynet

Gantz, Lapid Concede Defeat, Vow to Oppose Netanyahu

Blue and White Party Chair Benny Gantz delivered a speech Wednesday evening, together with Yair Lapid. While admitting that he will not be the one forming a governing coalition, Gantz expressed satisfaction with his party's impressive success at achieving an equal amount of Knesset seats as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud. "This is only the first day of the next decade in which I intend to serve the Israeli public in every way that I can," he said.

Ha'aretz

Firm Behind Likud Scheme Boast of Low Arab Turnout

An Israeli public relations company headed by a settler leader boasted Wednesday that it was behind the Likud initiative to place hidden cameras in Arab polling stations on Election Day. The firm added that it was to thank for the historically low turnout among Arab voters. "After a long preparation period, an amazing logistical base and deep and close partnership with the best people in Likud, we put together an operation that contributed crucially to one of the most important achievements of the right-wing bloc," the company posted on Facebook.

Times of Israel

Likud Mulls Political Costs of Coalition-Building

With the elections over, jostling for cabinet positions among right-wing factions has already begun. A top Likud operative said Thursday Likud expected to hand out the prestigious defense and finance ministries to coalition partners, but threw cold water over the hopes of the far-right Union of Right-Wing Parties to take control of the Justice Ministry. The comments seemed to contradict reports from within Likud on Wednesday that suggested Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was considering holding the defense portfolio himself.

Jerusalem Post

Bennett, Shaked Demand Recount

The New Right Party has demanded a recount of IDF soldiers' votes after the party reportedly failed to cross the electoral threshold. The Central Elections Committee has not provided updated numbers since early Thursday morning, numbers which showed Education Minister Naftali Bennett and Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked's party passing with just 0.01% over the necessary 3.25% of the votes. However, reports leaked from inside indicated that the party dropped below the threshold by an equally narrow margin.

Washington Post.

Analysts: Netanyahu Win May Complicate Trump Plan

Netanyahu's victory clouds prospects for the Trump administration's yet-to-be-released peace plan and could further undermine bipartisan support for Israel in Congress, according to analysts. Netanyahu is expected to annex parts of the West Bank as part of a possible deal with coalition partners to get the law changed in a way that would give him immunity from prosecution. President Trump called Netanyahu to congratulate him on Wednesday and predicted his reelection would increase the odds of a peace breakthrough. But annexation will spell the end of a two-state solution that Palestinians desire, making it all but impossible for them to embrace the secret peace plan reportedly formed by Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner.

The New York Times

Netanyahu's Coalition May Help Stave Off Indictment

Netanyahu may benefit from an effort by his right-wing coalition to protect him from prosecution on possible corruption charges. At least one right-wing party expected to join his new governing coalition has been open about its goal of passing a law granting immunity to Israeli Parliament members, including prime ministers. Bezalel Smotrich, leader of the Union of Right Wing Parties, wrote on Twitter last month, "it will be imperative to enact a law that will prevent [Netanyahu] standing trial."

The New York Times

Arab States See Another Nail in Coffin of Palestinian State

"It closes all doors for any possible peace settlement and any chance for the Palestinians to have a state of their own," said Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a political scientist from the United Arab Emirates. While that would cause frustration among the Arabs, there was little they could do about it, he said. The shrinking horizon for a Palestinian state "is concerning, but are the Arab regimes concerned?" asked Michael Young, a senior editor at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, Lebanon. "The Saudi and Emirati minds are on Iran, and they are not going to undermine their relationship with the United States and with Israel over these issues."

JTA

Why Israel's Younger Voters are More Conservative

While American millennials have a reputation for liberal politics, young Israeli Jews have gone the opposite direction. For at least the past 10 years, these voters have identified as right wing at much higher levels than their parents. According to the Israeli Democracy Index, 64 percent of Israeli Jews aged 18-34 identify as right wing, compared to 47 percent of those 35 and older. A survey a week ago likewise found a correlation between age and support for Netanyahu.

Did Israelis Just Vote to End the Two-State Solution?

By Hady Amr, Former US Deputy Envoy for Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations

- Israelis have just voted in what in many ways were vibrant democratic elections. Indeed, Americans could learn a lot from Israel when it comes to democracy: Israelis are automatically registered to vote, they get the day off to vote, and they get free intercity transportation to vote if they need it. That's the good news, and I wish we had all that here in America. But there's also bad news. As the saying goes, bad things often come in threes—and that has certainly been true here.
- First, the way the campaign was conducted: Israel's long-time Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is desperate to cling to power to avoid punishment for impending indictments on multiple counts, undertook a campaign that crossed multiple red lines that have alienated even his traditional supporters in the United States like AIPAC. Netanyahu not only built an alliance between his Likud party with a coalition that includes the ultra-racist Otzma Yehudit party, which draws inspiration from terrorist groups, but declared the coalition Likud's single closest ally, forging a vote-sharing agreement with them to share surplus votes. Although Otzma Yehudit won't actually end up with a seat in the Knesset—unless a couple of members of its alliance resign from the Knesset—their ultra-right-wing coalition bedfellows in Tkuma and the Jewish Home Party will likely form a core part of Netanyahu's government.
- Second, as if that weren't bad enough, Netanyahu also effectively declared an end to the two-state paradigm that has undergirded the U.S.-supported Oslo peace process for the past quarter of a century by declaring: "All the settlements, without exception, those that are in blocs and those that aren't, need to remain under Israeli sovereignty." Although it may just be campaign sloganeering, we all need to be clear that Israeli sovereignty over all the Israeli settlements would make it impossible to create a Palestinian state.
- Third, even if Netanyahu is not able to form a coalition government in Israel, none of his main opponents have said they would reverse the ever-expanding Israeli settlements in the West Bank, which are a growing threat to the prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace. Even without annexation this year, the growth of settlements make annexation all the more likely. Since the Oslo Accords were signed on the White House lawn in 1993, the number of Israeli settlers in the West Bank alone has more than tripled, from 116,000 to over 413,000 in 2017. Further, as Secretary of State John Kerry stated at the end of his tenure, this included "100,000 just since 2009 when President Obama's term began." Kerry added: "Nearly 90,000 settlers are living east of the separation barrier that was created by Israel itself. In the middle of what, by any reasonable definition, would be the future Palestinian state. And the population of these distant settlements has grown by 20,000 just since 2009." In other words, the difficulty of separation—and the likelihood of annexation—is growing stronger day by day.

- Indeed, undergirding the right-wing rhetoric in the election campaign was the fact that the number of Israeli settlers in the West Bank is now reaching a tipping point whereby it may be too painful to evacuate them to make room for a Palestinian state. And when Israelis and Palestinians come to terms with the fact that as Netanyahu says “no settler [will be] uprooted,” the prospects for a Palestinian state will have collapsed. That will mean that Jews and Palestinians will be living in adjacent communities in the West Bank controlled by Israel where Jews have the right to vote in Israeli elections and Palestinians do not.
- And whatever word one wants to use to describe this situation, it is entirely intolerable in the 21st century. Americans should all agree that it is also totally inconsistent with American values. This is not some far-off scenario. We are indeed on the precipice of a moment where, as the two-state solution collapses, Palestinians in the West Bank will need to be extended citizenship and the right to vote in Israel—complete with automatic registration, the day off, and inter-city transportation! And as Americans, who have learned to live together in an albeit imperfect melting point, who are we to object? As longtime peacemaker Dennis Ross just wrote, ultimately Americans won’t object.
- There are still a few brief moments to prevent what increasingly seems like an inevitable outcome. And that’s where America has a role to play. If we had the vision and the courage, we could today boldly declare: a commitment to two states based on the 1967 lines with lands of equal size swapped; that Jerusalem will be a shared city; that Israeli settlements in the West Bank can no longer be expanded; and that Israeli settlers on the Palestinian side of the barrier will soon need to be evacuated to make room for the Palestinian state.
- But of course President Trump won’t do that—indeed, he’s already said that the Israeli election results mean a “better chance for peace.” He’s moving in the opposite direction. He has recognized the Israeli attachment to Jerusalem without also recognizing the Palestinian attachment. He has closed the Palestinian office in Washington and the U.S. consulate in Jerusalem that once engaged them. And he has recognized the Israeli annexation of the Syrian Golan Heights, sending the signal—to Israelis and Palestinians—that the United States could very well recognize Israeli annexation of parts or even all of the West Bank.
- That’s where we come back not only to the Israeli elections but elections in America as well. If Netanyahu forms a government and annexes even parts of the West Bank, the only thing that will be able to bring two-state solution back from the dead is the election of a new American president in 2020. This president would need to firmly state and prioritize the swift implementation of a two-state solution, where the state of Israel and a newly created state of Palestine live side-by-side in peace and security, prosperity and dignity. But even if all or part of the West Bank is not imminently annexed, time is not the friend of those who dream of a two-state solution. Instead, time is the enemy, an enemy that can only be countered by a bold new approach that tenaciously and tangibly works for the on-the-ground and swift implementation of two states. Some Democrats—candidates for the presidency and not—seem

to have at least in part gotten the message. Let's just hope that the 2020 U.S. elections are not too late to bring the two-state solution back to life.

Netanyahu's 'Annexation for Immunity' Formula

By Shlomi Eldar, Senior Columnist

- As of this writing, the New Right party led by ministers Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked has not garnered sufficient votes to get into the Knesset — it did not amass the four-mandate threshold. When the extent of his party's election failure became clear after the polls closed on April 9, Bennett — the man who crowned himself Israel's next defense minister — claimed the soldiers would take care of his party the way he always looks out for them. He was referring to the votes of tens of thousands of serving soldiers that are counted after the other ballots and which could yield a sufficient number of votes for the New Right to cross the electoral threshold into the Knesset. However, even if the soldiers save him from oblivion, Bennett's party will only have four representatives in the new Knesset, depriving him and Shaked of any significant sway in the radical right-wing government that Netanyahu is expected to form. That said, the seeds sown by Naftali Bennett in Netanyahu's fourth government will sprout in Netanyahu's fifth.
- Bennett first flew the banner of annexation of West Bank lands in 2012. In the 2019 election campaign, he drew all the right-wing parties, including Netanyahu himself, into a competition of annexation declarations. The two words "territorial annexation," once considered acceptable only in radical circles, have slipped into legitimate public discourse. After the right wing crushed Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, depicting him as an obstacle to peace, and with most Israelis disbelieving that peace with the Palestinians based on a two state for two people solution is possible, the annexation prospect no longer sounds so absurd. As far as the right-wing electorate is concerned, annexation may even be de rigeur.
- Netanyahu has thus far thwarted all attempts by the right to legislate annexation of the West Bank. In February 2018, he blocked a proposed bill to impose Israeli sovereignty in the settlements, authored by Knesset members Yoav Kisch of the Likud and Bezalel Smotrich, then a member of HaBayit HaYehudi and now No. 2 in the alliance known as the United Right. Netanyahu argued at the time that promoting such legislation prior to the presentation of President Donald Trump's highly touted plan for Israeli-Palestinian peace could undermine future annexation. That was also the argument he used to block a proposed bill imposing Israeli sovereignty on the settlement town of Ma'ale Adumim.
- Things are different now. Netanyahu will have no choice. Despite his tremendous achievement in obtaining the renewed trust of the Israeli electorate that granted him a fifth term in office, Netanyahu is more vulnerable to pressure than ever before. On April 6, Netanyahu said in a Channel 12 interview that discussions were underway on extending Israeli sovereignty to the Etzion settlement bloc. To buttress his argument in this regard, Netanyahu noted that he had convinced Trump to recognize Israel's sovereignty over the formerly Syrian Golan Heights and over Jerusalem as Israel's capital. "I will not divide Jerusalem, I will not evacuate any community and I will make sure we control the territory west of Jordan," he declared. To

underscore the seriousness of his intentions and draw the borders of his planned annexation, he added, “Will we move ahead to the next stage? Yes. I will extend sovereignty, but I don't distinguish between the settlement blocs and the isolated ones because each settlement is Israeli and I will not hand it over to Palestinian sovereignty.”

- On March 26, Netanyahu cut short a visit to Washington due to tensions along Israel's border with Gaza. On the plane home, a senior Israeli official told reporters that US recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan affirms the principle that allows control of land captured in a defensive war. “Everyone says you can't hold an occupied territory, but this proves you can. If occupied in a defensive war, then it's ours,” the unnamed official said. Netanyahu assumes he can count on Trump's backing for a certain measure of annexation, at least of major settlements, i.e., the Etzion bloc and the settlement towns of Ma'ale Adumim and Ariel. However, the criminal indictments on charges of corruption lying in wait for him make him more vulnerable to pressure and increases the appetite of his prospective right-wing coalition partners.
- During the intense election campaign, which included numerous interviews with Israeli media, Netanyahu evaded questions on whether he would push for legislation to protect himself from indictment. Meanwhile, Knesset member Smotrich, who is expected to be named a minister in Netanyahu's next government, is working on such legislation. Shortly after results of the exit polls were aired, he declared unequivocally, “The right-wing bloc has won. A right-wing government will be established in the State of Israel and will serve out a four-year term.” Smotrich said the key to such longevity would be restoring legislation that existed until 2005 and provided Knesset members with automatic immunity from criminal prosecution. “The prime minister promised two days ago to extend sovereignty over Judea and Samaria [the West Bank]. That promise must be kept,” he said in conclusion. In other words, the alliance of right-wing parties would hand Netanyahu the legislation required to protect him against criminal indictment, and he, in turn, would fulfill his promise to extend Israeli sovereignty over the territories — a sort of “You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours” deal.
- Netanyahu is a seasoned political fox. He knew what he was doing when he floated the sovereignty issue in the lead up to the elections. He did so not only to attract settlers' votes but also to pave the way for the deal he knew he would have to make with other right-wing parties in order to form a coalition. All that remains is to agree on the annexation borders — the settlement blocs to be under Israel's sovereignty. This will be the departure point for negotiations on forming the government coalition — not on the very question of annexation, but on its extent. The right-wing government that Netanyahu will apparently form in the next few weeks will annex the territories. His coalition partners — the United Right, the ultra-Orthodox Shas and Yahadut HaTorah parties — and the center-right Kulanu Party led by Moshe Kahlon will not stand in his way. All of them favor annexation, none believes in the peace process with the Palestinians and each depends on the other. Netanyahu depends on them, and they on him. Without him, each of the new coalition parties is small, even tiny. Some just barely made it into the Knesset. They will, therefore, promise him a “French Law” or another similar law that

protects incumbent prime ministers from criminal prosecution. Netanyahu, for his part, will satisfy their hunger for more territory and more sovereignty. The task is simpler now that the tenant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue is not throwing up any roadblocks.