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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Friday, April 12*

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# News Excerpts

April 12, 2019

Ha'aretz

## **Rivlin to Meet Party Chiefs on Monday for Consultations**

President Reuven Rivlin will meet on Monday with the heads of the parties elected to the Knesset for consultations to determine who he will appoint to form the next government, he said Friday. Rivlin has announced that for the first time, the talks will be broadcast live for the sake of transparency. The consultations on Monday will include the largest parties and alliances: Likud, Blue White, Shas, United Torah Judaism, Hadash-Ta'al, and Labor. As soon as Rivlin tasks someone with forming a government, that person will have 28 days to form a coalition, with the possibility of a 14 day extension.

Jerusalem Post

## **Final Results: New Right Doesn't Make It**

The New Right party under Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked did not make it into the Knesset according to final results published by the Central Elections Committee on Thursday. The final tally awarded Likud a 36th seat, while United Torah Judaism lost one. Earlier, a technical error prevented publicly available numbers from reflecting the real results of the election, sparking hours of confusion and a lack of clarity on whether the soldiers' votes changed the final results.

Times of Israel

## **Kahlon Mulling Return to Likud, Would Stay Finance Min**

Following a dismal showing in the polls, Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon is negotiating a return to the Likud party. The negotiations are at an advanced stage, with Kahlon's Kulanu party to be united with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud and Kahlon retaining his position as finance minister. Kahlon is expected to receive an additional cabinet portfolio as part of the agreement, that would see Likud rise to 40 seats potentially boosting Netanyahu's battle against corruption allegations.

Times of Israel

## **Urged to Quit, Labor's Gabbay Considers Leadership Race**

Embattled Labor Party leader Avi Gabbay said Thursday he will "confer" with party members about "moving up the date of leadership primaries," amid intense pressure for him to resign after leading the party to its worst ever election result. Meanwhile, reports said Tal Russo, a former general who was second on Labor's list, is also considering stepping down, allowing veteran MK Merav Michaeli, seventh on the party's slate, to enter the Knesset.

Ha'aretz

## **AG Urged to Probe Likud Anti-Arab Camera Scheme**

Meretz lawmaker Michal Rozin called on Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit to launch a probe in order to check whether the Likud violated Israeli election law by installing hidden cameras in polling stations where Arab Israelis voted. Likud spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to provide its observers in polling stations in Arab communities with 1,200 hidden cameras. Rozin asked Mendelblit to determine whether the attempts at voter suppression within the Arab community by the Likud party amount to a violation of Israeli election law, which forbids any intimidation in the election.

Times of Israel

## **9 Generals, 29 Women, 49 Rookies: Meet the 21st Knesset**

While a record 39 parties ran in the election, with 14 mounting credible challenges to cross the electoral threshold, the final results gave seats to just 11. A record-breaking 49 new MKs will be sworn in on April 30, overtaking the 48 fresh faces elected in 2013. Of the rookies, nearly half hail from Blue and White, with 12 rookies in Likud. 13 new female MKs were elected, contributing to a matched-record high of 2015's 29 women elected. After the last election saw a large increase in Arab Israeli MKs the number will drop significantly from 17 to 11.

Associated Press

## **Israeli Spacecraft Crashes in Attempt to Reach Moon**

An Israeli spacecraft crashed into the moon Thursday just moments before touchdown, failing in an ambitious attempt to make history as the first privately funded lunar mission. The Beresheet spacecraft lost communication with ground control as it was making its final descent. Moments later, the mission was declared a failure. "We will try again," Netanyahu said. "We reached the moon, but we want to land more comfortably, and that is for the next time."

Ha'aretz

## **Med School in West Bank Settlement Gets Green Light**

Israel's Council for Higher Education approved the establishment of a new medical school at Ariel University on Thursday. The vote was to officially approve a decision made by the Council for Higher Education of Judea and Samaria, made the day before this West Bank council was dissolved and its responsibilities handed over to the Israeli council in February. On Monday, the High Court of Justice will hear a petition submitted by two academics against the establishment of the medical school, based on the claim that the approval "casts a heavy shadow on the decision making process in higher education."

## **What Next for Netanyahu, Trump and the Palestinians?**

By Amos Harel, Senior Columnist

- Benjamin Netanyahu's victory speech, delivered before dawn on Wednesday to hundreds of enthusiastic Likud supporters in a Tel Aviv arena, was largely devoted to describing the magnitude of his electoral achievement. But hidden between thanking the Creator of the Universe and complimenting his campaign team was an interesting policy statement. The prime minister talked about the "tremendous challenges we face," among them "challenges of normalization and peace with the Arab world." Some formidable tasks indeed await Netanyahu: forming a coalition, assigning the ministerial portfolios and, afterward, trying to pass a new budget, quickly, on the assumption that this will facilitate his government's long-term stability. Constantly looming in the background will be the most critical goal for him: the effort to halt, or at least slow down, the relentless ticking of the legal clock, with the expected submission of three indictments against him (and the possible launching of a new investigation).
- It seems unlikely that he will succeed in pushing through the so-called "French law," which would halt any legal proceedings against a serving prime minister. The discussion now revolves around restoring the original format of the parliamentary-immunity law, which would enable Likud to try to thwart any effort to lift Netanyahu's immunity. That could also be of interest, for similar reasons, to other central figures in the coalition, such as Arye Dery (Shas) and Likud's Haim Katz and David Bitan. However the scenario that was being mooted this week as the most likely envisions what was seen a few months ago as utterly improbable in a crisis-fraught country like Israel: Netanyahu might continue to head the government even as he stands trial. His coalition partners are likely to agree to this, and in the absence of an explicit prohibition, in the law and in court rulings, the High Court of Justice would not intervene.
- These developments will unfold more or less concurrently with the U.S. administration's presentation of its peace plan. President Donald Trump referred to that subject this week while congratulating Netanyahu on his victory, noting that the prime minister's reelection improves the prospects for peace. But the left's old fantasy about an American diktat that will force Netanyahu to make far-reaching concessions to the Palestinians appears highly unrealistic. Trump and Netanyahu appear to be coordinated in all their moves. In fact, the American leader just keeps heaping gifts on Netanyahu: In addition to the relocation of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, the withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran and the recent recognition of Israeli sovereignty in the Golan Heights, there was – right on the eve of the election – a U.S. declaration that Iran's Revolutionary Guards are to be considered a terrorist organization. In a Hebrew tweet, Netanyahu thanked Trump "for acceding to another important request of mine." The prime minister's tweet in English about the decision made no mention of Israeli involvement.

- The “deal of the century,” if it’s actually presented after multiple postponements, is likely to be relatively convenient from Israel’s point of view. It should allow Netanyahu, even if he’s heading a right-wing coalition, to respond positively to it even as he suggests a few reservations, as we wait for the anticipated rejection by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. In the background, the fantasy of the right wing will await realization: annexation of part of the West Bank, ostensibly as a unilateral implementation of clauses in the Trump plan after the Palestinian “no.” The right’s hope is that the American recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights will act as a precedent, as it’s based on the same grounds: seizure of territory during a war of self-defense that was forced upon Israel. In fact, the two territories were seized at the same time, during the Six-Day War.
- Robert Satloff is the executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. The institute maintains close ties with the Israeli establishment, and a period of research work in it is considered almost obligatory for ranking defense establishment officials after they conclude their term of service (former Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot will soon be ensconced there). However, in an article Satloff published in *Foreign Policy* immediately after the election in Israel, he warns that the presentation of the Trump plan in the near future will be disastrous. “It would be a serious mistake for U.S. President Donald Trump to take the still-secret proposals devised by his son-in-law Jared Kushner and his colleagues and issue them in the name of the United States,” Satloff writes.
- Satloff anticipates the plan’s failure. The rift between Israel and the Palestinians is too acute, and the extreme closeness between the administration and Israel does not allow Trump to be considered an honest broker. The plan will set back American interests in three critical realms, Satloff forecasts. It is liable to lead to Israel’s annexation of parts of the West Bank, to give Saudi Arabia heightened bargaining power over the United States (which needs Riyadh to advance the plan), and to divert attention from a significant administration achievement in the region: namely, ratcheting up the pressure on Iran. The “murky” status quo between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, manifested in the continuing and effective security coordination between them, could collapse like a house of cards when Abbas rejects the plan, observes Satloff. At the moment, he stresses, it’s the “Kushner plan,” not the “Trump plan” – and the president needs to ensure that it stays that way.
- Netanyahu first expressed support for annexing sections of the West Bank toward the end of the election campaign, when he still feared the loss of votes by Likud to parties to its right. Like any campaign promise, after the election, its fulfillment is a completely different proposition. The prime minister could leave the idea hanging in the air, as a future enticement for his partners, and say that it can’t be implemented now because the political conditions aren’t ripe for it.
- But the sheer idea of annexation – and the Trump plan in general – is already stirring anxiety not only among the Palestinians but in Jordan as well. Abbas, who took part in an economic forum this week in Amman, did not deliver a speech at the conference. The foreign minister of Oman, Yusuf bin Alawi, angered some of the participants by saying that the Palestinians

“should help Israel to get away from” what he said was its mistaken sense of being threatened. The Palestinians are apprehensive that Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states with close ties to the Trump administration, will adopt the American initiative and cast them aside as they forge diplomatic ties with Israel.

- That’s an unlikely scenario, but Palestinian suspicions of Trump are at their height. The Jordanians are concerned about the possible implications for them: a new outburst of violence on the Temple Mount or in the territories, which will spill over into the Palestinian refugee camps in the Hashemite kingdom. Jerusalem is also a potential hot spot in these circumstances. A scenario put forward in the Israeli defense establishment sees the PA’s security forces choosing to stir up feelings over the Temple Mount as a way of protesting the Trump plan, which presumably will grant the Palestinians only an inferior status in the city.
- Amid the noise of the election, the Israeli media forgot about events in the Gaza Strip. The past two weeks there, following the March 30 Land Day demonstrations, have in fact been unusually quiet. The Israel Defense Forces, keeping a deliberately low profile, reduced their beefed-up presence around the Strip. Hamas leaders didn’t offer Netanyahu their congratulations in the manner of Trump, but they too are probably not in mourning. Netanyahu’s policy, to keep the West Bank and Gaza isolated from each other, serves Hamas far more than it does the PA. Both sides are showing greater readiness to strike a deal for a long-term cease-fire in Gaza. Hamas has fewer options for pressuring Netanyahu following his election victory. The high proportion of votes for Likud in such cities as Ashkelon and Sderot shows that many of the residents of the communities bordering Gaza will back any decision the prime minister makes.
- During the past decade, Netanyahu has displayed considerable caution in his use of military force, notably in the Gaza Strip. If there’s a future danger, it lies in the possibility that the election victory will give rise to hubris in an invincible leader and induce him to take unwise security gambles. So far, there’s no sign of this happening. However critical one may be of Netanyahu’s conduct in other spheres, his reluctance to get involved in unnecessary wars is worthy of praise.
- This is Netanyahu’s fifth election victory (there were also two losses, in 1999 and in 2006, which he rarely mentions). The triumph of the right-wing bloc was no surprise – it was forecast by most of the pre-election polls. In addition, many Israeli media consumers are adept at factoring in the structural assumption that the real results will be even better for the right wing than the polls and the Election Day exit polls indicate. Netanyahu keeps winning because – in the eyes of his voters – he is not only a political magician but a meta-statesman who is able to preserve the country’s security despite adverse regional conditions and frequently shifting circumstances. In contrast to the hopes of his opponents, the accumulation of suspicions against him in the legal realm did not affect the course of the election. Most right-wing voters probably still think that protection of their personal security takes precedence over allegations of corruption. Others appear not to believe the accounts of the police and the prosecution.

- We are in the midst of the traditional period of self-flagellation on the left, which will undoubtedly provide grist for the mill of dozens of op-eds in Haaretz in the weeks ahead. But in contrast to some immediate claims, the left hasn't really been erased and it hasn't disappeared. The votes shifted within the bloc, from Labor and Meretz, which were seen to be less relevant in terms of what voters wanted, to Kahol Lavan, which for a moment seemed to have a chance of defeating Netanyahu. The desire to oust Bibi was the central consideration for its voters. But the major reason for the result lies in a numerical disparity that the left is unable to overcome, together with a political taboo that it's still not capable of shattering. For almost two decades, the right-wing camp has been slightly larger than that of the left. The ultra-Orthodox parties have an automatic affinity for a right-wing government (and will act in contradiction to that tendency only if there's a real danger that they will be left out of the government), while it is anathema to consider the Arab parties in coalition calculations.

## **Blue and White Ignored Israeli Arab Vote at Own Peril**

By Shlomi Eldar, Senior Columnist

- Soon after news stations released their exit polls and the actual results began trickling in on April 9 indicating that the right-wing bloc had won Israel's legislative elections, Labor Knesset member Shelly Yachimovich offered some impractical advice to Benny Gantz, chairman of the Blue and White party. With the sadness from Labor's stunning defeat visible on her face during an interview with Channel 12, Yachimovich said that if she were in Gantz's position, she would go knocking on the Arabs' doors to apologize and ask for their support. The idea that Arab voters have no firm ideological position and that they could be easily moved by a simple apology testifies more than anything else to the fact that even the left-wing parties have a condescending attitude toward Israeli Arabs, yet still expect their parties to bail them out when they are in trouble.
- In line with the famous adage that "the camel can't see the hump on its back," both Yachimovich and the Blue and White were busy scavenging for votes almost everywhere, except among the Arabs. Gantz and the members of his list treated the Arab vote as if they had it in their pocket, though only in the sense that the Arabs help them block Benjamin Netanyahu's path to a coalition and then stay out of the government while thanking the left. The Blue and White's leaders fell into a trap Netanyahu set for them and paid for it with failure at the polls. The party was formed through a series of mergers intended to create an alliance strong enough to seriously challenge the Likud. Netanyahu countered with one of his old, familiar tricks: fear mongering targeting the Israel Arab population. In a speech delivered Feb. 21 right after Yair Lapid, from Yesh Atid, and Gantz, from Israel Resilience, consolidated their parties, Netanyahu accused Blue and White leaders of "relying on Arab parties who not only don't recognize the State of Israel, but want to destroy it." His ploy worked.
- Four days later, a recording surfaced of Lapid, who during the 2013 elections had disparagingly referred to some Arab Israelis as "Zoabis," a reference to controversial former Knesset member Haneen Zoabi. In the recording, Lapid insisted, "We will not create a bloc [to prevent the right from forming a coalition] with the Arab parties. Period. Netanyahu just made that up, so that he could say that 'They would work together with the Arab parties to block us.'" On April 3, six days before the election, a young Arab woman burst into tears at an election rally in Tel Aviv as she asked Gantz why he was refusing to sit with the Arab parties. Gantz responded generically, as Netanyahu would, "Tell your leaders not to speak out against Israel." "Your leaders," he said. He made no mention of partnership.
- With only one more seat, Blue and White could have been the biggest party in the Knesset, surpassing Netanyahu and the Likud. They are tied at 35 seats. The Gantz-Lapid list, however, preferred to treat the Arabs like fire. They kept their distance, lost the Arab vote and will now have to sit in opposition. The same is true of the Labor Party, which was less worried about being branded leftist because it did not harbor the illusion that Likud voters would suddenly

switch and vote for its team. Nevertheless, the party acted the same as Blue and White. Even when it became clear from the polls that many Arab Israeli voters were disappointed that the Arab Joint List had disintegrated and were looking for an alternative, Labor still believed it could be a left-wing party without the Arabs. Labor was crushed, winning only six seats. The party's chair, Avi Gabbay, had opposed legislation proposed by Meretz to repeal the Nationality Law, which codified the Jewish identity of the State of Israel. Throughout the campaign, Labor had asserted that the Nationality Law should be fixed, not repealed.

- A few figures from the election results underscore how effective field work can be. In Kafr Kassem, home to Knesset member Issawi Frej, his party, Meretz, won 39% of the vote, more than any other party. The Arab Ra'am-Balad party followed, with 32%, and then Hadash-Ta'al, with 23%. While the voting rate in Kafr Kassem was 62%, in other Arab towns voter turnout was significantly lower, such as in Nazareth and Shfaram, at 39% and 47%, respectively. At the time of writing, there is still no accurate figure for the overall percentage of Arabs who voted. It is estimated to be 55%, which is considerably less than in the 2015 election, in which 64% voted. Reports in the afternoon of April 9 claimed that the Arab voting rate stood at just 20%, which may have been in part the result of reports of hidden cameras installed by the Likud in polling stations in Arab areas. After representatives of the Arab parties launched an emergency campaign to get voters to the polls, there was a slight uptick in the number of voters, which affected the results, such that Ra'am-Balad apparently passed the vote threshold.
- In Umm al-Fahm, for instance, party activists only managed to get voters to the polls about an hour before the polling stations closed. By the end of the day, turnout stood at just 45%, with Hadash-Ta'al winning most of the votes, 79%. In contrast, Blue and White received just 0.7% of the vote. Meretz — which put Frej, a Muslim Arab, fourth on its list, and Ali Salalha, a Druze from Beit Jann, fifth — won five seats in the election. N., a Bedouin who lives in Tel Sheva and spoke to Al-Monitor on the condition of anonymity, said, "We didn't feel like they [Meretz] represent us or that they are doing anything for us, given the wave of hatred we experience here." I've known N. for many years. He is an Israeli in every sense of the word. According to him, when the Nationality Law passed, not a single Jewish party stopped it, while the Arab Knesset members continued to squabble over seats and honor. "We have no interest in the [Zionist] parties that pushed us out or in the Arab parties that act as if they are doing us a favor by representing us," he said.
- N. waited until the polling stations were about to close before deciding to cast a vote. He ultimately did so in response to reports that turnout was really low in the Arab sector, which made him concerned that none of the Arab parties would manage to pass the vote threshold. He said that he voted not as an act of support, but in the hope that maybe he could "punish" the people inciting against the Arabs of Israel. "It didn't work," he said with a pained expression. Participation rates and results indicate that at least half of Israel's Arab population felt as if this year's election was not their election, that it would not change their lives, that what was will be, and that there was no one they could trust. The conclusion is that if the center-left parties fail to hold themselves to account and don't stop shunning Arab voters, they will never return to

power. Labor's Yitzhak Rabin won Arab votes in 1992, and in 1999 the party's Ehud Barak won 70% of the Arab vote, enabling him to defeat Netanyahu.

- Gantz began his election campaign with a video citing the number of Palestinians killed in Gaza during Operation Protective Edge in 2014, when he served as military chief of staff. He was hoping that it would encourage Israelis on the right to vote for him. In the end, he lost. Neither Arabs nor voters on the right were willing to put their trust in him.