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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Tuesday, April 9*

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# News Excerpts

April 9, 2019

Ynet

## **Gantz and Netanyahu Cast Ballots in Tight Knesset Race**

Leaders of the main political parties in Israel came out Tuesday to exercise their voting rights in their respective hometowns, in what is expected to be a close contest between the Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud and Benny Gantz's Blue and White party. Voter turnout by 12pm appears to be lower than in 2015 elections, and currently stands at 24.8 percent.

Jerusalem Post

## **Likud Hires Activists to Film Israeli Arab Polling Sites**

The Likud confirmed on Tuesday afternoon that it hired 1,200 election-day polling station observers, and gave them hidden cameras, saying it had done so in a bid to expose voter fraud. However, earlier on Tuesday Central Elections Committee chair Justice Hanan Melcer made it clear that it is illegal to secretly film voters on Election Day. The revelation comes after the Central Elections Committee tightened guidelines on what is permitted and what is not permitted in the ballot box following the capture of hidden cameras in several Arab towns in the north and in Rahat in the south.

Times of Israel

## **Report: Trump Plan Rollout Depends on Election**

President Donald Trump's Mideast peace plan will be unveiled by mid-June, White House sources said Monday. The date will depend on a number of factors, including the outcome of Israel's elections, and the next prime minister's progress in forming a coalition. It said the White House was also taking into account national holidays, and Jewish and Muslim religious festivals, in choosing a date. Earlier, Gantz said that if he wins Tuesday's election, he expects the Trump administration to delay the release of its peace plan.

JTA

## **Democratic Presidential Hopefuls Excoriate Netanyahu**

Three candidates for the Democratic Party's presidential nod said that criticizing Netanyahu does not make you anti-Israel. Pete Buttigieg, Bernie Sanders and Beto O'Rourke all took shots at Netanyahu, with O'Rourke calling the prime minister a "racist." Buttigieg said Netanyahu's support for annexation is "harmful to Israeli, Palestinian, and American interests." "Supporting Israel does not have to mean agreeing with Netanyahu's politics," Buttigieg said. "I don't. This calls for a president willing to counsel our ally against abandoning a two-state solution."

Ha'aretz

## **US Admin Refuses to Discuss Annexation Remarks**

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo refused to comment Monday on Netanyahu's recent statements, in which he said Israel would annex parts of the West Bank if he's reelected. The question arose during a press conference at the State Department on the Trump administration's decision to designate the Iranian Revolutionary Guards as a foreign terrorist organization. Netanyahu also said he has been discussing annexation with the Trump administration and hopes the administration will accept his position.

The New York Times

## **Palestinians Say Annexation Talk is No Surprise**

Annexing parts of the West Bank would be a potentially fatal blow to the prospects for a peace agreement, and could unleash a new round of violence, Palestinians warned on Monday. But among Palestinians and in the wider Arab world, the reaction to Netanyahu's comments was largely muted, colored by a deeply skeptical view of Israeli vows and intentions. The prime minister's remarks changed little, many Palestinians said, because in their view the two-state peace process was dead already and Israel was headed in the direction of annexation all along.

AFP

## **New Palestinian Government to be Formed Within Days**

Palestinian Prime Minister-designate Mohammad Shtayyeh will announce the makeup of his new government in the coming days, Palestinian officials said Monday. Shtayyeh has until April 14 to form a new government that is expected to exclude all supporters of Hamas. Analysts say real decision-making power remains with 84-year-old President Mahmoud Abbas. Abbas on March 10 charged Shtayyeh with forming the new government, replacing Rami Hamdallah's technocratic administration which had the nominal backing of Hamas.

Times of Israel

## **For Liberman, a Looming Crisis of His Own Making**

If Avigdor Liberman's Yisrael Beytenu party falls under the electoral threshold in Tuesday's election, as is predicted by some opinion polls, the downfall of the former defense minister will largely be of his own making. Liberman was, after all, the architect of the very move — the electoral threshold hike to 3.25% — that now endangers the existence of his party. He also turned a popular political ally into a rival. And he walked away from the Defense Ministry five months ago without a memorable record, leaving Netanyahu to burnish his own security credentials in the run-up to the national vote.

## **Six Scenarios for How the Israeli Election Will Play Out**

By Anshel Pfeffer, Senior Columnist

- The opinion polls, like the Israeli public, are split right down the middle. Half the surveys conducted last week, before Friday's cutoff, put Benny Gantz's Kahol Lavan slightly in the lead. The other half had Likud with a similar-sized advantage. It's a dead heat between the two largest parties. But on one thing the polls were in consensus: The bloc of right-wing and religious parties had a small majority over the center-left opposition. Small, but not that steady, as it's a majority based on seven parties that are all pretty close to the 3.25-percent electoral threshold. So nothing is certain and the polls are questionable anyway. The following are the six likeliest scenarios for the results that we'll start hearing as the polls close at 10 P.M. Tuesday night.
- **Scenario One: The polls are right**  
If Likud and Kahol Lavan receive more or less the same number of seats but the right-wing and religious parties have a small majority, we can expect both Benjamin Netanyahu and Gantz to proclaim victory in the wee hours Wednesday. But it will be Bibi who has the chance to form a coalition. It won't necessarily be easy, because it will mean Netanyahu needs to make a separate deal with each of the seven other parties in his coalition, each of which can bring down his government and hold him to ransom at any point. This is when Netanyahu will start to think he may be better off building a grand coalition with Gantz instead.
- **Scenario Two: A right-wing surge for Netanyahu**  
If Netanyahu's gevalt! campaign works and right-wing voters believe he's in danger and move from the smaller parties to Likud, Netanyahu is in the best situation, from his perspective: a larger Likud, the biggest party in the Knesset, with a sizable margin over Kahol Lavan and a choice of minnows with which to form a coalition. And they won't have the power to bring him down unless they act together. This is what he has been trying to create with his panic attack in the last four days. But what if the gevalt is too successful and the surge of right-wingers to Likud becomes a tidal wave?
- **Scenario Three: A surge for Netanyahu and a right-wing-party wipeout**  
If too many right-wing voters abandon the smaller parties they were planning to vote for and go over to Likud, Netanyahu will be the leader of the largest party in the Knesset, but he may not have a coalition. The number of small parties that are pushed beneath the electoral threshold could change the balance between the blocs. Netanyahu believes he's not cannibalizing his coalition partners, just trimming some of their excess fat. But what happens if he kills some of them in the process? If just one coalition party falls beneath the threshold, says Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu, Bibi's coalition will still probably have a majority. But what happens if Likud's surge also drowns Moshe Kahlon's Kulanu and Naftali Bennett's Hayamin

Hehadash? If three coalition parties fall beneath the threshold, the center-left will have a majority and Netanyahu will have lost his coalition. No matter how big Likud is.

- Scenario Four: A soft-right shift to Gantz

Since the start of the campaign, it has been clear that Gantz's only path to victory is winning over a large number of "soft-right" voters from parties in the current governing coalition. At one point, at the end of February and in early March, this seemed to be happening: The opposition parties had a tiny majority in the polls for a few days. But the coalition swiftly bounced back and reestablished its small but steady majority. But what if more of those soft right-wingers have indeed moved to Gantz and, undetected by the pollsters, are remaining with him? They could be this election's true game changer. In sufficient numbers, they could deny the Netanyahu coalition its majority. Gantz still won't win automatically, as he won't be forming a government with the Arab parties and will need to find partners currently in the coalition.

- Scenario Five: A left-wing surge for Gantz

Kahol Lavan is running its own gevalt campaign, not as panic-struck as Netanyahu's, but Gantz's party is still trying to entice left-wing voters, mainly from Labor, with promises that Kahol Lavan is only "a meter away from victory" and replacing Netanyahu. If it succeeds, Kahol Lavan may end up larger than Likud by even five or six seats. But on its own, it won't change the balance between the two blocs. However, a sizable lead for Kahol Lavan, making it unquestionably the largest party, will have an effect. It may give at least some of the right-wing and religious-party leaders the excuse to stick it to Netanyahu after he tried to steal their voters, even though they already promised to support his coalition. And even if Netanyahu succeeds in keeping them on board for a while, Gantz will have an opportunity to form a coalition and become prime minister later on this Knesset term, should Netanyahu lose control for any reason.

- Scenario Six: A surge for Gantz and a left-wing-party wipeout

While fewer parties on the left are vulnerable to the electoral threshold than those in the coalition, it's still a vulnerability on both sides. A surge to Kahol Lavan could conceivably push Meretz below the threshold. Balad-United Arab List is also near the threshold and could be a victim of low turnout in the Arab community. If either of these parties fall out of the next Knesset, it doesn't matter whether Likud or Kahol Lavan are larger, the center-left bloc will simply have no chance to win enough seats to block Netanyahu's next coalition. It's game over for Gantz. Some of these scenarios can happen in combination and either cancel each other out or ensure a victory to either side. Netanyahu's dream scenario is a combination of scenarios two and six. For Gantz, scenarios three, four and five would work very well together. They could also lead to a post-election deadlock, like the one in 1984 between Likud's Yitzhak Shamir and Labor's Shimon Peres. In such a scenario this time, neither Netanyahu nor Gantz would be able to build a coalition and would be forced to sit together in a national-unity government. That may well be the scenario both of them are secretly planning for.

## What More Netanyahu Will Mean for American Jews

By Emma Green, Columnist

- Benjamin Netanyahu's main opponents have tried to use an unusual weapon against the longtime prime minister ahead of a defining Israeli election set for Tuesday: They've argued that he has damaged the relationship between Israel and diaspora Jews. For some American Jews, the strong alliance between Netanyahu and Donald Trump of the past few years has added stress to their relationship with Israel, which has become especially fraught in the years since the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in the early 2000s. While some Jews in the U.S. appreciate Trump's positions on Israel, many detest the American president's domestic politics and believe that he has enabled anti-Semitism and xenophobia. And while segments of the self-identified pro-Israel community in the U.S. resolutely support anything that the Israeli prime minister does, some have been wary of Netanyahu's alliance with right-wing forces, and disappointed by what they see as his failure to facilitate religious pluralism. Tuesday's major election in Israel marks a high point of strain in the relationship between at least some American Jews and Israel, which has changed radically in the past generation.
- To understand the American Jewish relationship with Israel, it's helpful to divide American Jews into three rough categories. On the right lies the self-described pro-Israel crowd, many of whom are Republicans, and many of whom are deeply religious. For the most part, this group would cheer another round of Netanyahu. Among modern-Orthodox Jews, for example, "the relationship is incredibly strong—it's as strong as ever," Nathan Diament, the executive director of the Orthodox Union Advocacy Center, told me. Part of this connection is sociological; these Jews often travel to Israel, have family there, and send their children there to study. Some in this group don't believe it's their place to criticize Israeli policy. "We should be deferential to the decisions that the democratically elected leaders in Israel make about Israel's security," Diament said. "They're the ones whose lives are on the line, and they're the ones whose kids are serving in the [Israel Defense Forces]."
- Then there's the left: Jewish activists and organizations somewhere on the spectrum between critical and skeptical of Israel, who have pushed back on Israel's policies toward Palestinians and abhor the close relationship between Netanyahu and Trump. The activists who interrupted Trump's appearance at the Republican Jewish Coalition event in Las Vegas this weekend are part of this set, with a group called IfNotNow. "The reality of Israel's occupation of Palestinian people and land is ... something that younger Americans and younger American Jews have come of age, politically, into," Libby Lenkinski, the vice president of public engagement at the New Israel Fund, an organization that advocates for progressive policies in Israel, said in an interview. For Jews who primarily developed their relationship with Israel before or directly after 1967, when the country's continued existence was still in doubt, unquestioning support for Israel's government is the default, Lenkinski said. But for Jews decades younger—especially those who have largely come into adulthood under Netanyahu's right-leaning

government—Israel’s contested relationship with the Palestinian population is the “defining aspect of their perception of and relationship to Israel, in a way that is really generational,” she said.

- And then there are the American Jews who are somewhere in the middle, those who might self-describe as pro-Israel or occasionally attend the American Israel Public Affairs Committee’s (AIPAC) annual conference on Israel, but who might feel uncomfortable with the direction of Israeli policy, especially under Netanyahu. Major conflicts over religious pluralism in recent years have exacerbated their uneasiness. Netanyahu’s government has been unable to secure a deal to create egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall, a sacred Jewish site in Jerusalem that is currently under Orthodox control, and Israeli rabbinical authorities have refused to recognize marriages or conversions conducted by even some Orthodox American rabbis.
- These are the American Jews “for whom the continuation of a Netanyahu government is squeamish,” Yehuda Kurtzer, the head of the North American division of the Shalom Hartman Institute, which advocates for pluralism in Israel and the U.S., told me. Especially under Netanyahu and Trump, this middle-of-the-road community has been unsure of how to navigate its political discomfort, “because there’s been such a strong hegemony for a long time that ... we’re allowed to criticize Israeli policy,” but usually on “religion and state more than ... security policy, foreign policy, occupation, etc.,” he said. The events leading up to the Israeli election have made the divisions among these three groups even more stark. Some in Israel greeted Netanyahu’s promise to annex the West Bank with skepticism, seeing it as a last-ditch bid for right-wing support in Tuesday’s election. But progressive Israeli advocacy groups took it seriously. Annexation “will keep Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza locked into an intolerable reality without basic rights and freedoms,” said Daniel Sokatch, the CEO of the New Israel Fund, in a statement. This “will destroy the dream of millions of Jewish people to achieve self-determination in a Jewish and democratic state, for which Netanyahu will have to accept responsibility.”
- Over the weekend, Democratic presidential hopefuls, including Bernie Sanders, Beto O’Rourke, and Pete Buttigieg, condemned Netanyahu’s “extreme right-wing” policies, but the Trump-Netanyahu bond seemed stronger than ever. When Trump declared Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps a terrorist organization just one day before the Israeli election, Netanyahu took credit for the American president’s decision in a tweet written in Hebrew. (The English version of the tweet was slightly less triumphant.) Other Netanyahu moves have prompted even wider backlash. Staunchly pro-Israel groups that rarely criticize Israel, including AIPAC and the American Jewish Committee, called out the prime minister for inviting members of Otzma Yehudit, a marginal, openly anti-Arab, ultranationalist Israeli political party, to join a coalition with Netanyahu’s party, Likud. (The Israeli Supreme Court later banned Otzma’s leader, Michael Ben Ari, from running in the election.)
- Benny Gantz, Netanyahu’s primary opponent, has tried to use these criticisms against Netanyahu in the election. At AIPAC’s annual policy gathering in Washington in March, he

vowed to support religious pluralism and create space for liberal Jews who want a mixed-gender prayer space at the Western Wall. Gantz and his political partner, Yair Lapid, have centered their campaign on criticisms of Netanyahu, accusing him of corruption, divisiveness, and unseemly partnerships with right-wing leaders such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán. Netanyahu will likely face charges of fraud, bribery, and more following an investigation by Israel's attorney general into the prime minister's dealings with wealthy donors and media moguls, which has given his political opponents plenty of material for attacks.

- And yet, none of this might make a difference. The latest polls—which, especially in Israel's complicated coalition politics, should be interpreted with skepticism—show Netanyahu's right-wing bloc edging out Gantz and Lapid's centrist coalition. Even if they were to achieve a win over the prime minister, their policies on security and diplomacy might not end up looking so different from Netanyahu's. Earlier in the campaign, Gantz promised that Israel will retain its control over the Golan Heights, the contested territory that lies on the border with Syria. Just a few weeks later, Netanyahu claimed victory when the U.S. recognized Israeli sovereignty over the area. And although Gantz has not matched Netanyahu's pledge to begin annexing the West Bank, he has emphasized that the Israeli military will retain its control over the Palestinian territory. To many Israelis, Netanyahu's diplomatic and military victories over the past few years, thanks in large part to his tight relationship with Trump, are victories for Israeli security, and should be replicated by whoever holds the seat of power next.
- Ultimately, the anxiety that some American Jews feel over Israel may be unreciprocated by a majority of Israeli Jews—and doesn't have much of a role in Israeli elections. American Jews offer significant financial and political support to Israel, especially in advocating for Congress's ongoing military aid to the country. And many Israelis, like many American Jews, see the Jewish state as a project shared among Jews in and out of Israel. But Americans also have a tendency to assign themselves an outsize place in Israeli political affairs, and to underestimate the importance of security fears in determining Israeli elections. When Tzipi Hotovely, a minister in Netanyahu's government, controversially told a reporter last year that most American Jews don't understand Israel, because they “don't have children serving as soldiers” and “don't feel how it feels to be attacked by rockets,” she might have just been stating publicly a view that many Israelis hold in private.
- This Israeli election is significant for the future of the Israeli-diaspora relationship, in that it marks a pinnacle in the fracture between Israeli and American Jews. Under another Netanyahu government, discontent on the left and among middle-of-the-road Jews is likely to escalate. But in reality, that may be the case under any Israeli government that ends up forming. “The state of Israel has radically redefined what it means to be a Jew,” Kurtzer said. “The idea that it would have this centrifugal effect, that it's ... spinning us off because it's so divisive, is deeply disappointing.”