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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Tuesday, May 14*

### Headlines:

- WH said to review plan to send up to 120,000 troops to Middle East
- Risk of Gaza War Remains Imminent UN Envoy Mladenov Warns
- Qatari Envoy Enters Gaza to Deliver Cash Boost
- Israel to Close Temple Mount for Jews on Jerusalem Day
- Opposition Slams Reported Coalition Agreement to Immune Netanyahu
- Liberman Says No More Coalition Talks, will Walk if his Demands Not Met
- Veteran Palestinian Negotiator Was Denied U.S. Visa for First Time
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By Nahum Barnea, columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth

- **AI Monitor: “Can Israel’s Blue and White Party Get People into the Street?”**

By Yossi Beilin, form Israeli minister of justice

# News Excerpts

May 14, 2019

## Times of Israel

### **WH said to review plan to send up to 120,000 troops to Middle East**

The White House has reportedly been reviewing a plan to send as many as 120,000 US troops to the Middle East if Iran accelerates its uranium enrichment or attacks American targets. The ambitious plan, which would take weeks or month to complete and which approaches the scale of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, was presented last Thursday at a meeting of defense chiefs, The NYT reported late Monday, citing more than half a dozen defense officials in US President Trump's administration. Tensions have been simmering with Tehran recently, as the nuclear between Iran and world powers threatened to unravel. See also, ["White House Reviews Military Plans Against Iran, Report Says" \(Reuters\)](#)

## Jerusalem Post

### **Risk of Gaza War Remains Imminent UN Envoy Mladenov Warns**

A Hamas-Israel war will likely break out if there is another renewed escalation of violence in the coming weeks, United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov warned during a visit to the Gaza Strip on Monday. "I hope that after a month of weekly tensions, everyone has learned that the risk of war remains imminent," Mladenov said. "We have perhaps the last chance to consolidate the understandings that have been reached [between Israel and Hamas] and to make sure that the situation avoids another escalation. The next escalation is going to be probably the last one," he said. See also, ["UN envoy to Mideast warns of war between Israel, Hamas" \(Ynet News\)](#)

## Ynet News

### **Qatari Envoy Enters Gaza to Deliver Cash Boost**

The inflow of Qatari cash into Gaza is expected to resume Monday after the Gulf state's envoy entered the coastal enclave for the first time since the end of the latest round of cross-border violence between Israel and Hamas, which claimed the lives of four Israeli civilians last week. The Qatari envoy, Mohammed al-Emadi, during his visit will hand-over some \$30 million to Gaza officials, meant for the families living in poverty and those affected by the humanitarian crisis in the impoverished enclave. Qatar's Gaza Reconstruction Committee confirmed the payouts will begin on Monday, with each family in need receiving \$100 in assistance. Payments will be distributed via the post offices in the Strip. Emadi is expected to meet with leaders of the Palestinian factions during his trip. See also, ["Qatari millions enter Gaza" \(Arutz 7\)](#)

## Ha'aretz

### **Israel to Close Temple Mount for Jews on Jerusalem Day**

For the first time in three decades, Israeli authorities are expected to bar Jews from entering the Temple Mount on Jerusalem Day, which marks Israel's capture of East Jerusalem in the Six-Day War. The police have closed the Mount — the holiest site in Judaism and the third holiest in Islam — to Jews every year for the last 10 days of Ramadan, which this year coincides with Jerusalem Day. The last year Jews were barred from the site on Jerusalem Day was 1988. "Every year, the Temple Mount is closed to visits during the final days of the month of Ramadan for reasons of public safety and security and public order," the police told the group Students for the Temple Mount. See also, ["Israel to bar Jews from entering Temple Mount on Jerusalem Day for first time in 30 years" \(i24 News\)](#)

## **Opposition Slams Reported Coalition Agreement to Immune PM**

Israel's political opposition leaders on Monday slammed reports that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is planning to secure a bill that would allow the High Court of Justice to be overruled on administrative matters, including enabling the incumbent premier to avoid prosecution in three pending criminal corruption cases. In his first speech to the Knesset on Monday, new opposition leader and former IDF chief Benny Gantz addressed the reports and decried Netanyahu's "cheapening of the rule of law" and said "we will not let it pass." "I come today to battle against the new threat we face--a threat to the functioning of the democratic system and its legal and constitutional institutions," declared the freshman Israeli lawmaker who last month was narrowly defeated by Netanyahu for the premiership. See also, "[Lapid: Netanyahu does not deserve hearing in graft probes](#)" ([Ynet News](#))

### Times of Israel

## **Liberman Says No More Coalition Talks, will Walk if Demands Not Met**

Yisrael Beytenu party chief Avigdor Liberman threatened to take his party to the opposition Monday, citing significant gaps with the Likud party in coalition talks, mainly on security-related issues. Liberman declared that he would hold no further negotiations, telling Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that he could accept his demands or risk sending Israelis back to the polls. "I don't intend to meet with anyone anymore. They know the demands. If they want we will be [in the coalition], if they don't want we will go to the opposition," he said. Netanyahu needs Yisrael Beytenu's five seats to form a governing coalition. Without them, his other potential partners will only give him 60 seats out of the Knesset's 120. See also, "[Liberman demands ban on DNA tests by rabbinical courts](#)" ([Jerusalem Post](#))

### Reuters

## **Veteran Palestinian Negotiator Was Denied U.S. Visa for First Time**

A veteran Palestinian negotiator said on Monday she had been denied a U.S. travel visa for the first time, and viewed it as retaliation for her criticism of the Trump administration and Israel. Asked about Hanan Ashrawi's allegations, a U.S. State Department official did not comment directly, but said visas are not refused on the grounds of an applicant's politics if those political statements or views would be lawful in the United States. Since they boycotted the Trump administration over its recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital in late 2017, the Palestinians have seen cuts to U.S. funding that have contributed to their economic distress in the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip. "It is official! My US visa application has been rejected. No reason given," Ashrawi said on Twitter. She is a member of the executive committee of the umbrella Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and took part in interim peace talks with Israel dating back decades.

### Ha'aretz

## **Israel Okays Major WB Settlement Roads, Seizing Palestinian Land**

Israel approved two major transportation projects in the West Bank, setting the ground for a seizure of large tracts of Palestinian land. The permits issued by the Civil Administration last week for the paving of two roads leading to relatively isolated Israeli settlements are set to go into effect in July. The planned Hawara Bypass, stretching 5.5 km according to the NGO Peace Now, would serve the settlement of Yitzhar, south of the Palestinian city of Nablus, and other, smaller settlements north of Tapuach Junction. A second road, the Al-Aroub Bypass, which Peace Now says would be 7 kilometers, would serve settlers in the Hebron Hills.

## **Netanyahu Stalling for Time Refuses to Face the Charges Against Him**

By Nahum Barnea, columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth

- **The bottom line is: the chance that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will face trial on any of the three corruption cases pending against him, are close to none. The recently elected Knesset has enough supporters of the PM who will back any legislation to protect him from prosecution. The question is at what cost?**
- **Will other cabinet ministers and members of Knesset, who may also face criminal proceedings, benefit from the proposed law? Will whatever deals coalition partners make, be outlined in the coalition agreements as required by law or will they be agreed on unofficially? Will the price be no military service for ultra-Orthodox and no open businesses on Shabbat, as religious parties insist? Will it be annexation of settlements, as the hard-right insists? What is the Knesset for if not to provide criminals with sanctuary?**
- **The cherry on top of the coalition agreements being prepared, is the proposed law allowing members of Knesset to overturn supreme court ruling, with only a regular majority. This would cancel any and all checks and balances that had always protected Israelis against government tyranny.**
- **Netanyahu finds the ground has been laid out for him. The court's standing has been eroded over the years, by two great legal minds. One a supreme court justice whose legislative activism agenda was seen as a condescension towards other views: Aharon Barak And on the other hand, a professor of law who made restricting the reach of the court, his life's mission: Daniel Friedman.**
- **Attorney General, Avichai Mandelblit is walking a fine line. He understands any slip, on his part will be punished by an injunction to the supreme court. He was dragged into the fight when he agreed to hold off until after the 2019 elections, handing over material to the prime minister's lawyers. Since then, his attempts to schedule a hearing before indictment, for Netanyahu have failed.**
- **The Prime Minister's attorneys are cynical. Knowing their client's legislative agenda, they are playing for time. Netanyahu claimed a hearing will clear any suspicions against him but now he is stalling using any means at his disposal, to put a hearing off until he can pass the laws that will protect him from prosecution.**
- **No Attorney General can ever be strong enough to resist such moves by a prime minister and supporters such as the far-right members of Knesset.**
- **The irreversible harm to the rule of law, values, and the institutions of Israeli democracy, is a high price to pay, just to save one man's skin.**

## **Can Israel's Blue and White Party Get People into the Street?**

By Yossi Beilin, form Israeli minister of justice

- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is busy these days with negotiations to form the next government. Israeli law offers the person tasked with forming the government 28 days to negotiate, and he can ask from the president for another two weeks to complete his task. Netanyahu just asked President Reuven Rivlin for these extra 14 days.
- The 28-day period is ending May 15, and no coalition agreement has been signed yet. So when the extra time that Netanyahu requested in order to form his government finally runs out, it will be his old coalition partners who will give up a significant portion of their demands and ask to join his government. Almost none of them could find a better government for themselves, but they will still try to pressure Netanyahu to give them the best Cabinet portfolios and agree to their other demands, knowing that Netanyahu tends to fold under pressure. They realize that he is especially pressured this time around, facing an indictment.
- Netanyahu himself is not very excited about the new government he is about to form. He would rather take advantage of an amendment to the law, which he introduced in 2009, just a few months after he was reelected prime minister. Until then, it required one-third of a Knesset faction's members to be allowed to leave their faction without receiving the party's approval and without infringing on their rights as Knesset members. Netanyahu's amendment allowed for a group of seven Knesset members to leave their party, even if they do not constitute one-third of all its members. At the time, he argued that this was one of a series of new laws intended to improve "governability" in Israel. Actually, he was trying to lead a group of at least seven Knesset members under Shaul Mofaz from the now-defunct Kadima party to leave their party and join his coalition. Though Mofaz did not leave Kadima, the amendment remained in place. Now, it could help Netanyahu if at least seven members of opposition party Blue and White quit their faction and join his coalition.
- While Netanyahu's representatives are involved in intense discussions with representatives of the ultra-Orthodox, right-wing and far-right parties, the prime minister has also been sending signals to various Knesset members from Blue and White. The first name released in this context was ultra-Orthodox Knesset member Omer Yankelovich (No. 23 on the Blue and White Knesset list). On the other hand, it will not be easy for the Likud to convince anyone from Blue and White to leave their current political home and commit to a vote that would allow Netanyahu to avoid a trial and punishment. In contrast, Netanyahu's "natural partners" have long given him their promise on this issue. The United Right party even went so far as to list a change to the Knesset Member Immunity Law as one of its own conditions for joining the coalition.
- In other words, even if Netanyahu's emissaries manage to find seven "righteous people" in Blue and White, who would agree to quit their brand-new party and join the Netanyahu coalition, if they will not swear under oath to vote for any law that would keep Netanyahu out of criminal court, Netanyahu will have no choice but to prefer his current immunity coalition. In that case, he will have to grant its members the kind of concessions that will leave him sick to his stomach.

- In the event that Netanyahu is forced to recreate his outgoing coalition, and if Blue and White manages to maintain its current size, Benny Gantz's party will have to focus on one single issue: impeding every attempt by Netanyahu to avoid standing trial. Presumably, this should not be too difficult. After all, it's the only thing that holds the party's members together. This became very obvious during the last round of violence in the Gaza Strip on May 4-5. The main criticism voiced by most members of the faction honed in on the alleged anemic Israeli response, rather than on Netanyahu's vision of avoiding any agreement with the Palestinians no matter what the cost, and of his preferring Hamas over the PLO. The people speaking most on behalf of Blue and White happened to be its more familiar members — such as former Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon and former Cabinet Secretary Zvi Hauser — and their views hadn't changed since their days in the Likud. Yair Lapid was right behind them, sharing their views so as not, God forbid, to sound too far to the left. Ofer Shelah may be a voice of reason, who is intimately familiar with the situation, but in this case, he sounded like a minority of one in his own party. Gantz himself was less conspicuous than the others, and less decisive when he did speak out.
- Opposition to Netanyahu was and remains the one real common denominator shared by this group of individuals (members of Blue and White). It desperately needs to bring this common bond to the forefront. This is why investing most of the party's energy in preventing the transformation of Israel's fragile democracy into a kind of authoritarian regime would be a natural course of action. The Blue and White party must invest its efforts in preventing Israel from becoming like the governments in power in Hungary or Turkey. In both those cases, there may be an election every few years, but whoever is elected runs the government as he sees best fit, silences opponents, controls the media and rewrites the law so that he can continue to rule, despite constitutional and judicial restrictions.
- This is the meeting point between the clear political interests of a party with no significant common denominator uniting its members, and the very serious threat to the character of the State of Israel as a nation in which the law is more than just a recommendation and in which leaders are expected to be subject to decisions by those official bodies charged with ensuring that the law is implemented. Blue and White will be doing the right thing, not only for itself but also for the country as a whole, if it moves past idle threats such as Lapid's "We will make things miserable for the government," and focuses on the political and particularly the public struggle to prevent Netanyahu from carrying out his plans.
- Netanyahu is expected to be indicted pending a hearing. If Netanyahu can't get out of the hearing, and if after that hearing Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit decides not to indict him, I can only assume that there will be a big legal battle, culminating in an appeal to the Supreme Court over an unreasonable decision. If that appeal is rejected, the whole Netanyahu affair will be over. On the other hand, if the new Netanyahu government rushes to amend the law pertaining to the immunity of Knesset members, or if, in the name of "government reform," it tries some other ploy, it will be necessary to appeal to the millions of people who voted against Netanyahu in the last April election, and bring hundreds of thousands of them to Rabin Square in Tel Aviv to scream out in horror at what is happening to Israel's democratic form of government. These screams could turn into a roar, and that roar could instigate change.
- There was no way that Blue and White could have become the ruling party. That was true the minute they announced that they would not cooperate with the Israeli Arab population in any way to form a government, just as they would not cooperate with Netanyahu. Nevertheless, it

won a very respectable number of seats, largely because so many people in Israel wanted to see Netanyahu out of office. It is quite possible that historians will say that the party's only role was to force Netanyahu to face the same legal processes that anyone else in his situation would. Then the party could break apart, just like all the other centrist parties that preceded it.

- On the other hand, it is also possible that a successful struggle, which brings the masses to an empty Rabin Square, will cause the Knesset members from Blue and White to undergo a kind of political boot camp together. It could even energize them and get them involved in other vital issues, which would bring about the kinds of political and social change that Israel so desperately needs.

**SUMMARY:** There was no way that Blue and White could have become the ruling party. That was true the minute they announced that they would not cooperate with the Israeli Arab population in any way to form a government, just as they would not cooperate with Netanyahu. Nevertheless, it won a very respectable number of seats, largely because so many people in Israel wanted to see Netanyahu out of office. It is quite possible that historians will say that the party's only role was to force Netanyahu to face the same legal processes that anyone else in his situation would. Then the party could break apart, just like all the other centrist parties that preceded it. On the other hand, it is also possible that a successful struggle, which brings the masses to an empty Rabin Square, will cause the Knesset members from Blue and White to undergo a kind of political boot camp together. It could even energize them and get them involved in other vital issues, which would bring about the kinds of political and social change that Israel so desperately needs.