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Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

May 30, 2019

Ynet News

Knesset Votes to Disperse, Hold New Elections on September 17

Knesset members voted Wednesday night to dissolve parliament, barely a month after the swearing in of the new assembly, after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu failed to strike a coalition deal with his prospective partners. Dissolving the Knesset and holding a new round of elections just months after the last and without ever having formed a government is unprecedented even in Israel's fast-paced political landscape. Of the 120 lawmakers that make up the Knesset, 74 voted in favor of dissolving parliament, and 45 voted against. At the heart of Netanyahu's failed attempt to build a coalition after the April 9 elections was legislation to draft ultra-Orthodox men into the army. See also, ["Explainer: The main players in Israel's next election, the second this year" \(Reuters\)](#)

Times of Israel

Netanyahu Slams Liberman: He Deceived the Voters, Part of the Left

A visibly angry Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu launched a diatribe against Yisrael Beytenu chief Avigdor Liberman in the early hours of Thursday morning after the Knesset voted to disband and send Israel back to the polls on September 17. With Liberman having prevented Netanyahu from forming a majority coalition, the prime minister blamed the Yisrael Beytenu party chief for "dragging the country to unnecessary elections." "Avigdor Liberman is now part of the left. He brings down right-wing governments. Don't believe him again. I will tell you about it tomorrow. Maybe I will tell you some things you don't know. He deceived the electorate just to get votes," Netanyahu charged. See also, ["Liberman: Every reasonable person would accept my bill" \(Arutz 7\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Labor Rejects Netanyahu's Finance-Defense Ministry Offers

In talks with Labor head Avi Gabbay, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu offered him the Finance Ministry and three other ministerial positions in an effort to convince him to join his government, according to Channel 12. A Labor party spokesman said the offer was considered and rejected. A Labor spokesman confirmed that the party has received an offer from Likud that included stopping bills that the party believes would harm democracy, including the Immunity Law. "Even in Israeli politics there's a boundary to the amount of disgust that the public can absorb. I can't believe that you'd do something like this," Blue and White number two Yair Lapid tweeted in a response addressing Avi Gabbay on Wednesday. See also, ["Labor chief admits weighing, then rejecting, last-minute offer to join coalition" \(TOI\)](#)

Times of Israel

Israel to Host 'unprecedented' Israel-Russian-US Security Summit

Jerusalem will host next month an unprecedented trilateral meeting of top security officials from Israel, Russia and the US, the White House announced on Wednesday. "In June, United States National Security Adviser Ambassador John Bolton, Israeli National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat, and Russian Secretary of the Security Council Nikolay Patrushev will meet in Jerusalem, Israel, to discuss regional security issues," the White House press secretary said in a statement issued minutes before the Knesset voted to disband and to set new elections for September 17. See also, ["Israel to host 'unprecedented' US-Russia security summit on Middle East" \(i24 News\)](#)

Jordanian King to Kushner: Pal. State only Possible on Pre-67 Lines

Jordanian King Abdullah told White House senior adviser and presidential son-in-law Jared Kushner on Wednesday that a Palestinian state can only be created along the border lines that existed before the 1967 Six-Day War. "His Majesty stressed the need for a comprehensive and lasting peace based on a two-state solution, leading to an independent Palestinian state on 4 June 1967 lines with east Jerusalem as its capital," according to a statement from Abdullah's palace. U.S. President Donald Trump officially recognized in December 2017 that Jerusalem as Israel's capital, in addition to relocating the U.S. embassy in Israel there five months later, and last March officially recognized Israel's control of the Golan. See also, ["Jordan very likely to participate in Bahrain peace workshop" \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

Reuters

Iran's Revolutionary Guards: Trump's Middle East Peace Plan will Fail

Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guards said on Wednesday that Washington's long-awaited Israeli-Palestinian peace plan was doomed to fail and that the Palestinian resistance movement would respond firmly to those who proposed such deal. U.S. President Donald Trump has touted the plan as the "deal of the century" but Palestinian officials have already spurned it, believing it will be heavily biased in favor of Israel. Trump's team, headed by his Middle East adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner, is set to unveil the plan at an international investment conference in Bahrain in late June. The Revolutionary Guards said in a statement carried by Tasnim news agency that the only solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was "withdrawal of Zionists from the occupied lands, and return of Palestinian refugees to hold free elections".

Ha'aretz

Church of Holy Sepulchre to Undergo First Major Restoration in Centuries

The three churches in charge of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre say they have reached an agreement to begin a multimillion-dollar renovation of Jerusalem's holiest Christian site. Leaders of the Greek Orthodox, Catholic and Armenian churches issued a statement Monday announcing the project to restore the foundations and flooring of the church, where many Christians believe Jesus was crucified, entombed and resurrected. Jordan's King Abdullah said he would help fund the restoration work, whose cost is estimated at tens of millions of dollars. The Hashemite Kingdom views itself as the custodian of the city's Christian and Muslim holy sites. The Vatican has agreed to contribute 500,000 euros (\$557,000) for the project, which will begin with a comprehensive survey of the building and the necessary work. See also, ["Churches strike deal to restore Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre" \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

Calcalist

EI Al Launching Tel Aviv to Tokyo Route

Israel's national carrier EI Al Israel Airlines Ltd. is launching a thrice-weekly direct route connecting Tokyo's Narita Airport to Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport, the company announced Wednesday. The route, which will employ a Boeing 787 Dreamliner aircraft, will take off in March 2020. In January, Calcalist reported a plan to start operating direct flights between the countries, outlined during the visit of Hiroshige Sekō, the Japanese Minister of Economy, Trade, and Industry, to Israel. Trade between Israel and Japan, not including diamonds, amounted to \$3.5 billion in 2018, according to the Israeli Export Institute, a 31% increase from 2017. Import from Japan totaled around \$2.35 billion, while export from Israel to Japan reached \$1.16 billion, a steep increase from the past decade.

Netanyahu Just Suffered One of the Biggest Losses of His Political Career

By Anshel Pfeffer, Ha'aretz contributor

- This wasn't the worst night in Benjamin Netanyahu's political career. He's lost elections and primaries before. He spent an entire decade outside the prime minister's office after his first term ended disgracefully in 1999.
- On Wednesday night, Netanyahu was forced to dissolve the Knesset and call a new election, effectively admitting (though he didn't say so) that he failed to win the April 9 election. He is still prime minister for the next four months. But this was his worst night in thirteen years.
- March 28, 2006, was an even worse night for Netanyahu. Likud crashed in the election to only twelve seats, its worst result ever. As the numbers were coming in, half the Likud MKs were already planning how to challenge the leadership. What followed was one of Netanyahu's most incredible comebacks: With a handful of young MKs and stalwart Reuven Rivlin by his side, he walked into the convention hall and rallied the fifty party members still hanging around in a rousing speech. It was a compelling sight, and for a while, the plotters sheathed their daggers. It gave Netanyahu much-needed time to reestablish hold on his shattered party.
- But Netanyahu's appearance in the Knesset on Wednesday had nothing of the fire of that night in 2006. We saw an ashen-faced Bibi, ranting about the injustice done to him and the nation by Avigdor Lieberman. It was the Netanyahu we never see in public and only hear about in whispers. Unprepared and unscripted. Raging at the destruction of his career.
- Netanyahu's powers of persuasion are legendary. He has persuaded Israeli voters time and again that centrist hawks and retired generals are "weak leftists." Now he was even trying to persuade them that "Lieberman is part of the left." Lieberman, the man who demands death-penalty for terrorists and wants Israeli-Arabs to pledge allegiance to the state in order to keep their citizenship. It's a hard sell, even for Netanyahu.
- With three and a half months to the next election, Netanyahu hasn't yet worked on his messages with his strategists. It will be surprising, though, if they continue wasting their efforts on Lieberman. Lieberman hasn't got that many voters anyway, and they are mostly elderly Russian-speaking immigrants who have been told since they arrived in the Promised Land that Yisrael Beitenu is the only party looking after them. Netanyahu's spin-doctor Jonathan Urich has threatened to spend 10 million shekels on campaigning in the Russian media. But he would do better to shore up Likud's base, as with Moshe Kahlon's Kulanu newest merged with Likud. The only other address for "soft right" is Benny Gantz's Kahol Lavan.
- Netanyahu could still find himself needing Lieberman on September 18. Lieberman is realistic, and doesn't believe that he can win the next election, though he does believe that by standing up to the Likud-Haredim alliance, he will win plenty of secular right-wingers and even some centrist voters. What Lieberman wants is to be kingmaker. Despite insisting throughout this crisis that he wants Netanyahu to remain prime minister, when moments before the dissolution vote he was asked by reporters if in the next election he would support

Netanyahu, he didn't answer the question. Instead, he said: "Netanyahu had a chance to form a right-wing government."

- This time around, Lieberman won't say whether he plans to support Netanyahu or Gantz, and if Netanyahu continues attacking him on the campaign trail, the choice will become much easier for him. Lieberman will make this election about freedom of religion, linking Netanyahu to the Haredim. It will be easier for him to claim the secularist mantle because Yair Lapid, who once owned it, is now merged with Gantz's Kahol Lavan. As the great opposition to religious coercion, it will be easier for Lieberman to link up with the center-left. In recent days, even Meretz MKs have said that they are willing to sit with Lieberman in a coalition, if it means seeing off Netanyahu.
- But even so, beating Netanyahu, with all that just happened, is still a tall-order. The right-wing-religious bloc has a majority, even without Lieberman. Netanyahu still has a better chance of winning than Gantz. In his angry monologue after the vote, Netanyahu said that Israel will now be "burning billions (on election) because of the personal ambitions of one man." He meant Lieberman, but he could have been describing himself.
- This will be the third consecutive election brought forward because of Netanyahu's personal issues. In December, he cut the Knesset's term by six months in an attempt to preempt the indictments against him. In 2014, he brought the election forward by three years in order to prevent it from passing a law which would have forced his private freesheet, Yisrael Hayom, to charge money for its daily rag. And now he's strangled a new Knesset in its cradle, just 30 days after the MKs were sworn in, because he won't allow anyone else to try and form a government. So far, his record in self-centered, selfish elections is mixed. He won one election, the second ended without a result. If Netanyahu wins his third election on September 17, it may prove to be a very short victory, because just two weeks after that, his pre-trial hearings begin.
- Netanyahu is still prime minister, but the Knesset can no longer pass major legislation and his plans for an immunity law and overriding clauses limiting the power of the Supreme Court will have to wait another day. Even if he forms the next government, it could be too late to stop the slow legal juggernaut putting him on trial. This was Netanyahu's worst night in thirteen years, but he may well have even worse nights ahead of him before 2019 is over.

SUMMARY: This will be the third consecutive election brought forward because of Netanyahu's personal issues. In December, he cut the Knesset's term by six months in an attempt to preempt the indictments against him. In 2014, he brought the election forward by three years in order to prevent it from passing a law which would have forced his private freesheet, Yisrael Hayom, to charge money for its daily rag. And now he's strangled a new Knesset in its cradle, just 30 days after the MKs were sworn in, because he won't allow anyone else to try and form a government. So far, his record in self-centered, selfish elections is mixed. He won one election, the second ended without a result. If Netanyahu wins his third election on September 17, it may prove to be a very short victory, because just two weeks after that, his pre-trial hearings begin.

Israelis Must Decide: Zionism or Annexation

Israel is in need of a leader who will deal with the questions over its eastern border, come up with a strategy to ensure Jewish majority and protect Zionist vision that was basis of creation of state

By Tamir Pardo, former director of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency

- **Leaders, for the most part, are identified by one of two traits. They can be visionaries, initiating historic processes. Alternatively, they can be followers who charter their course based on the direction of the wind. Menachem Begin was a visionary, initiating policy and changing the course of history. Despite opposition from his own political camp, the former prime minister signed a peace treaty with Egypt, weighing the cost and benefit of losing strategic depth in the Sinai Desert, in exchange for an end to war between the nations.**
- **Where is such a leader today? Where is the brave visionary who will protect Zionism for future generations. Where is the leader that will take on what others have avoided for the past 50 years, namely Israel's eastern border? The West Bank is to this day a controlled territory. There is no question of our right to it or our duty to hold on to it to ensure our security until a political solution is found. But even if one can be found, it is so far out of sight. So what can we do in the meantime? There are 15 million people between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Half of them are not Jewish. That is why Israel's leaders have always stopped short of annexation of the West Bank. Now, political considerations that have nothing at all to do with security are endangering Zionism itself with this proposed annexation of Judea and Samaria.**
- **There is a consensus among Israelis that the major West Bank settlement blocs and East Jerusalem neighborhoods will always remain in Israeli hands. This is also becoming more recognized, albeit unofficially, by Palestinian and other Arab leaders in the region. Why then embark on a one-sided annexation that will set the West Bank ablaze, put lives at risk and end any future hopes for a viable political solution? Annexation, pushed by political parties vying for a role in government, will bring about the nightmare most feared by security officials. Jewish settlements will surround 170 separate pockets made up of 2.6 million Palestinians.**
- **Is the Zionist dream to be replaced by the Arab one of a single state with a Jewish minority? Have the last election results, as the settlers claim, given the government a mandate for that? A responsible government must strengthen Israel's control inside the settlement blocs but must also ensure that a secure Jewish democracy can survive by separating from millions of Palestinians.**
- **So long as there is no Palestinian partner for a peace agreement, and the possible emergence of one is still far off, it is up to us to define our eastern border, incorporating the settlements and neighborhoods we intend to hold, and concentrate our recourses on them and freezing development of any settlements east of that boundary. We should employ our border patrol units along that line, although our military and security forces should still operate beyond it to secure our safety until the time a political agreement is viable.**
- **This government must consider the repercussions from annexation and be clear about its strategy to maintain a Jewish majority in Israel - and Zionism itself. All policies should then be presented to the public to be decided by referendum or elections. Ending the Zionist vision should not be done or decided upon as part of coalition talks.**